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NEW AGE THEOLOGICAL RESPONSE TO THE VATICAN DOCUMENT

**Edited by
Sebastian Painadath.**

PROCESSED

SEP 27 2004

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jeevadhara

A JOURNAL FOR SOCIO-RELIGIOUS RESEARCH

New Age Theological Response to the Vatican Document

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Editorial

Read the signs of the times! this has been a basic thrust of the Second Vatican Council. With this perspective the Catholic Church entered upon a new age of dialogue with cultures and religions. "Dialogue is the new way of being the Church", said Paul VI during the Council. *New Age* is a sign of the times challenging the Church for a creative response. It is not a coherent system of beliefs and practices, but a sort of canopy under which diverse neo-religious movements flourish. They are not a direct threat to the Church, but they do exert a growing fascination on Christians especially in the West. Millions of Christians seem to have lost their bearings in the traditional *religious* practices; however most of them look for *spiritual* experiences which would offer depth and goal to life. This development has created confusion among traditional Christians and evoked concern among the Church authorities.

It is in this context that the Vatican authorities issued a 'provisional' document: **Jesus Christ the Bearer of the Water of Life, A Christian Reflection on the New Age**, in 2003. (*L'Osservatore Romano*, 33/34, August, 2003; Pauline Publications, Bombay, Rs 30). This has been issued jointly by the Pontifical Council for Culture and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. At the outset the text makes its purpose clear: "This document does not aim at providing a set of complete answers to the many questions raised by the *New Age* or other contemporary signs of the perennial human search for happiness, meaning and salvation. It is an invitation to understand the *New Age* and to engage in a genuine dialogue with those who are influenced by *New Age* thought."(1)

Since such a document has a pastoral concern it has to be studied carefully and interpreted in the living context of the local Churches. Hence theologians have the responsibility to respond to such an important document with a genuine concern for an effective dialogue between Christian faith and the contemporary world. In this issue of *Jeevadhara* some theologians from India and America offer their theological response to this document. All contributors welcome the pastoral motive expressed in the document. The diverse trends of the *New Age* are touched upon and in contrast to them the elements of Christian faith as enunciated in the traditional dogmatics are clearly upheld. The glossary and the bibliography are useful tools for further study and reflection.

However theologians raise some questions on the basic premises of the document. In the responses given in this issue of *Jeevadhara* three problems are raised here for discussion:

1. on the method: The document claims to strive at a 'genuine dialogue with those who are influenced by *New Age* thought' (1). But dialogue consists in not just letting the other speak, but in listening to the other. The document tries to describe in a pick-and-choose way some of the ideas of the *New Age* from divergent sources. But no attention is given to the radical questions *New Age* thinkers are raising on the traditional Christian understanding of the creator God, salvation through Christ, mediation through the Church and approach to nature. Is genuine dialogue possible between a theology that claims to be 'rational' (6.1) having 'clear concepts on God' (3.5), and the *New Age* thinking that is labelled as 'diffuse' (3.5), 'eclectic' (2.1) and 'irrational' (6.1)?

2. on the context: The document notes that '*New Age* religiosity addresses the spiritual hunger of contemporary men and women' (Foreword), and that many Christians are 'not satisfied by the Church' (1.5). But no effort is made to make an in-depth analysis of the cultural, religious and psychological causes of the wide-spread crisis in faith. *New Age* challenges the Church to make a critical introspection on the language of theology and symbols of liturgy, on the structures of the community and practices of spirituality. The dichotomy between world and God, between science and religion, between psychology and spirituality is a basic malaise, which the Church has to address in confronting the *New Age*.

3. on the content: The passionate concern of the document is to emphasise the Christian faith in the personal God, who has saved humanity through Christ, and entrusted this mission to the Church. This is done consistently in adherence to the theological development in the West. However in today's pluralistic world Christian faith is also reflected upon in dialogue with non-western cultures and religions. New perspectives are opening up in spirituality and a new language is developing in theology through an intense dialogue between Christian faith and other religions, and between faith and science as well. The document shows a great reluctance to take these developments seriously.

The theologians speaking here are not 'providing a set of complete answers to the many questions raised by the *New Age*'. But they point out that the answers of yesterday may not be able to address effectively the questions of today.

Sameeksha
Kalady

Sebastian Painadath

Spirituality and Religion

Swami Tattwamayanaanda

The document makes sweeping remarks on the Hindu dharma without paying attention to the spiritual heritage of Hinduism. The Hindu experience of the immanent One is not a denial of the transcendence of the Divine; the Hindu understanding of rebirth does not do away with personal responsibility; The Hindu symbols of the Motherliness of God are expressions of God's love. The Hindu understanding of the cosmic Christ and of universal spirituality could be an invitation to Christians to broaden their theological perspectives.

Religion and Spirituality

The document seems to have failed in clearly understanding what Hindus consider the distinction between 'religion' and spirituality (2).

Spirituality has something to do with the inner growth of the human, moral and cultural advancement and refinement. This spiritual growth is possible irrespective of one's religious identity whether or not one follows a religious belief system, whether one believes in God or not. In this respect, it transcends the dogmatic framework of any organized religion, though it does not necessarily contradict the teachings of the founders or prophets of particular religions.

The Hindu believes that even an agnostic can be *spiritual* though s/he may not follow the hierarchical tenets of a God-centred belief-system. On the other hand, a human openly professing a particular religion, who mechanically performs all the rituals of a conventional believer may be totally unspiritual, if s/he is a narrow-minded fanatic. S/he is 'religious' only in a very conventional sense. This attitude may be more appropriately called religiousity rather than religion.

Whenever Hindus draw a line between religion and spirituality it is always to point out the distinction between the mechanical profession of religion from the universalistic dimensions of its original teachings.

Spirituality is essentially a universalist approach towards our fellow-beings and is not confined to certain dogmas or belief-structures.

Taking Christianity, for example, Hinduism may distinguish the Church from Christian faith, the latter representing spirituality or the spiritual dimension of Christian heritage and the former representing, the hierarchical, formalistic religion. A person is said to be spiritual if this Christian spirit is the basis of his/her human relationship with the outside world. In this respect, Joan of Arc, Meister Eckhart, William Blake, and American mystics and transcendentalists like Thoreau, truly represent the spiritual rather than the religious dimension of Christian faith.

The Mother Divine

The document reveals the classical Western tendency to interpret Eastern, especially Hindu, religious ideals in confrontationist terms. A typical example is the way it has analysed Helena Blavatsky's theosophical movement merely as feminine (Hindu) spirituality's reaction to masculine (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) spirituality (2.3.2). The Hindu concept of the motherhood of God, the worship of God as the universal Mother etc. are thoroughly misunderstood by the authors of the document. The Hindu concept of the Motherhood of God has nothing to do with the feminist movement as the document tries to make out. It is, in fact, only a way of understanding the overflowing love of the Divine terms of the most sacred of human relationships - the relationship between mother and her children (see document page, 34).

Monism

There is a trend in modern times to interpret everything in terms of absolutistic monism. This is found not only in New Age religious thought, but also in what may be called New Age Science. The idea is that there is a gradual, progressive movement from the gross to the subtle, from *without* towards *within*, and, from the many towards the One. This new development does not deny the spiritual claims of Christianity, but only questions its exclusive claims to truth.

The document has failed in presenting monism in its proper metaphysical perspective. Monism in Hindu tradition is not a contemporary form of pantheism (7.2). Again, it is stated that it leaves no room for a transcendent God. On the contrary, Hindu monism, as expounded in the Upanishads and later interpreted by commentators

like Sri Sankaracharya, upholds the transcendent, immanent and omnipresent Divine. Hindu monism does not deny the existence of a personal God but only asserts that the highest concept of God is that of an eternal, attributeless, transpersonal Reality which is not limited by any name or form. This higher reality is understood as the human evolves towards higher levels of spiritual consciousness.

Cosmic Christ

Religion, just as science, deals with certain universal truths while history deals with a living, dynamic human society.

Many thinkers, both Christian and non-Christian, believe that the advent of Jesus is not an isolated event. They share the view that it is part of a cosmic phenomenon, a pattern, which is repeated in many countries and among many cultures and peoples. They are more inclined to accept this cosmic dimension of the Christic phenomenon rather than the historical Christ.

But the document asserts that Jesus Christ is certainly not a pattern and therefore there is no such thing as a Cosmic Christ, there is only the Jesus of history, who is a synthesis of both the human as well as the Divine (3.3).

Hinduism, on the other hand, accepts both the historical as well as the cosmic dimensions of incarnations. For a Hindu Jesus is both a cosmic spiritual pattern as well as an important historical figure. Therefore, the assertion that Christianity is the only religion which accepts a historical world-view seems to be lopsided.

If we accept the advent of the historical Christ as the beginning of (Christian) spirituality then, what about Adam and his immediate descendants? They, too, are historical figures who lived before Christ but were not benefited by Jesus's teachings!

A Hindu understanding of Christ would be both cosmic as well as historical. While Christ the man was an inhabitant of history and Christianity a historical event, the spiritual ideal for which Christ lived (and died) goes beyond history (see the document page, 58).

Karma

The document says that the most serious problem, according to New Age thinking, is alienation from the Divine Cosmic Reality and not the human's sin, as asserted by the traditional Church (4.8). According

to the document, the concepts of Karma, rebirth and concepts of the individual soul's cyclic evolution have disturbed the traditional eschatological concepts of the Church, by dispensing with the notions of sin, heaven and hell, God's interference in human affairs, and divine reward and punishment.

It may be observed here that the Hindu understanding of Karma and rebirth does not, deny God's interference and the concepts of heaven and hell.

The New Age has given full freedom to the human to explore his own inner potential, trust himself and progress towards perfection.

The Challenge to the Church

The Church's attitude towards some of the views expressed in the New Thinking is reminiscent of its reaction to the discoveries of Copernicus, Galileo and Bruno in the 15th and 16th Centuries. Just as the scientists demanded recognition of the truths discovered by science, the New Age thinkers are now demanding a broadening of outlook, a willingness to understand and appreciate, wherever possible, the spiritual truths found in the religious belief-systems outside Christianity. By rejecting the idea that there is more than one path to spiritual reality the Church seems to be repeating its earlier mistakes - when it refused to accept the discoveries of scientists.

'The new paradigm' which, according to the document, 'is one of the recurring themes in New Age writings', will have to be accommodated as part of a process of opening up to spiritual truths practised and followed outside the Christian world.

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Wrong Answers, but Right Questions

Paul F. Knitter

The thinkers of the New Age raise questions on radically separating God from the cosmos, and on restricting the saving presence of the Divine to the Christ-event. These are issues to be addressed in a genuine dialogical process with the advocates of the New Age. Instead, the document just proposes answers taken from age-old dogmatic theology with no sensitivity to the way of thinking of the contemporary spiritual seekers. It arrogantly warns against the faulty answers of the New Age without responding to the valid questions.

Jean Daniélou helps me formulate my general feelings and assessment of the Vatican's 2003 document on New Age Spirituality. During the first part of the past century, when "modernism" was the *bête noire* of Vatican concerns, Daniélou bravely chided Church leaders and theologians for missing the opportunities that modernism was offering Christians. Modernists, he pointed out, may fail in their answers, but not in their questions. The issues they were dealing with were real problems for many Christians. All that Vatican was doing in its reaction was warning against the faulty answers without responding to the pressing questions. As he gently but acutely pointed out: "it is quite clear that barriers are not answers."¹

That's the fundamental and unhappy problem with this document: it raises barriers but offers no new answers. The Vatican's basic response to New Age is to declare that it is wrong and that traditional Christian beliefs are right. I emphasize "traditional" beliefs, for there is not the slightest indication that "what the Church has always taught" might

1 Quoted in Paul Lakeland, *The Liberation of the Laity: In Search of an Accountable Church* (New York: Continuum, 2003), p. 36.

learn something from the New Age movement. The relation between the two, we are told, is "either-or." "...it is not possible to isolate some elements of New Age religiosity as acceptable to Christians while rejecting others." Christians have nothing to learn. The only response is to condemn and build barriers.

Yet I do not want my response to the Vatican document to be similar to its response to New Age. While the New Age movement is posing many right questions, it also offers many wrong answers. And the Vatican does well to make this clear. Yes, many New Agers slip into an excessive individualism, using spirituality as a drug to stimulate ever more intense spiritual highs. Yes, New Age easily can sell out the tested wisdom of religious traditions to the latest psychological fad. And yes, all this can lead to a "me-first" kind of spirituality that lacks the backbone of socio-political involvement or awareness. I could not agree more with the Document's criterion for grading all spiritualities and theologies: whether they promote "self or solidarity" and whether they offer "strategies to reduce the number of those who will eat at humanity's table." (2.4) Admittedly, using this criterion, much of New Age (not only New Age!) will receive a failing grade.

But to condemn is not to construct. To erect barriers is not to provide answers. In what follows, I would like to try to describe and briefly comment on two central questions that the New Age movement poses for all Christians and that the Vatican document does not answer, or even hear. I fear that until Church leaders and teachers provide some credible answers to these questions, Catholics will continue to drift away.

A Dualistic Divinity

Throughout the Vatican Document we hear reverberating warnings that New Age leads to pantheism or monism or Pelagianism insofar as it seeks to remove what for Christianity are essential differences "between Creator and creation, the real distinction between man and nature, or spirit and matter." (2.2.4)...In New Age "There is no alterity between God and the world. The world itself is divine." (2.3.4.3) ... "We recognize here an implicit pantheism. This is a fundamental point which pervades all New Age thought and practice." ... As Christians we believe that "man is essentially a creature and remains so for all eternity, so that an absorption of the human I in the divine I will never be possible. (2.3.1)

By absorbing the human I into the divine I, New Age spirituality, according to the Vatican, will inevitably lead to some form of Pelagianism. If we locate the Divine within the human, "there is no need for Revelation or Salvation which would come to people from outside themselves, but simply a need to experience the salvation hidden within themselves (self-salvation)É" (2.3.4.1)

Granting the dangers of pantheism or monism or Pelagianism, what Vatican theologians fail to realize is that *Christian dualism is a problem for a growing number of Christians*. A God who is "all out there," or *totaliter alter*, a God who has to "come down" and "intervene" in the world in order to have a relationship with the world, a God whose voice has to be heard *solely* or even *primarily* "from the outside" in a book, or a hierarchy, or even a Savior, is a God who for many people no longer really speaks to them. This is *not* to deny that God is indeed "outside and other;" nor is it to deny our need for a savior. But this "outside and other" has to also become "inside and one-with" humans and the world. This does not require what the Vatican is so fearful of – a "fusion with God" but it does require a greater unity between the divine and the human/cosmic than the Vatican can conceive.

Here I believe lies the problem that not only New Agers but many Catholics have with their shepherds in Rome: magisterial theology and teaching is still caught in an evident *dualism* between God and creation. Here the New Age movement is right! Much of Christianity (not all!) labors under a burden of dualism that so stresses the difference between Creator and creatures that the relationship between God and the world becomes external or extrinsic or added on, or even invasive of, the creature's experience and understanding. Given the prevailing image of God as a being sufficient unto *Himself*, who is not really changed in *His* relations with creatures, whose saving relationship with the world is an addition to or an intervention into the world – it is unavoidable that for Christians God is an external agent and not, as Jung pointed out, a "mighty movement within the soul." Also, in relation to what we know of the world from contemporary science, such a God can, at the most, be only a "ghost within the machine."

One of the fundamental reasons why the Vatican has not, or cannot, offer a response to this problem of dualism is that it does not seem able to recognize that there is, as it were, a half-way house between dualism

and monism/pantheism. It has been called *non-dualism*. As Raimon Panikkar, drawing on his experiences and insights mediated through Advaitic Hinduism, describes it: Non-dualism means that God and the world are not two - but it doesn't mean that they are one! There is both a mystical and an ontological middle ground between dualism and monism.

Ontologically, this means that, without being identified with each other, God and creation have their being in each other. Each is intrinsically related to each other - though in very different ways. For God to be a loving Creator, this God is naturally, inherently, related to creation. As God cannot be God without loving, so God cannot be God without relating in creative love to that which is "other" to God. But in this very act of loving the other, the other is embraced into the very life of God.

Mystically or experientially, this means that we can - and are called to - experience God as part of our very being. While a distinction remains, there is no separation. This makes it difficult, as Rahner said, to make clear identifications between that which is natural or human, and that which is supernatural and divine. As he insisted, there is no such thing as *natura pura* - "just nature." Our very natural existence is already supernatural (the "supernatural existential.") One might also say that it becomes difficult to crisply delineate between "my acting" and "God's acting" - between nature and grace, for as Rahner also pointed out, the more one lives God's life in grace, the freer and more self-activating one feels oneself to be. To experience this "non-twoness-but-non-oneness" between God and myself is to experience God being God in and through me. Or in Paul's words, "I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me." (Gal. 2,20)

New Age questions, insights, and mistakes are providing Christians with the opportunity to discover the non-dualism that is inherent in Christian experience and teaching. It seems the Vatican document misses these opportunities.

A Haughty Christology

Because Vatican theologians do not seem able to recognize a non-duality between God and world, they have to limit the non-duality of the incarnation to Jesus of Nazareth. Or to put it differently but more sharply, because the Vatican document holds to an absolute distinction between God and humanity, it cannot recognize a real distinction between Jesus

and Christ. In fact, the Christ (or the Logos), understood as the “divine energy” by which God communicates God’s self to creatures and identifies with them, seems to be limited to the historical reality of Jesus. New Age’s attempts explore how what happened in Jesus of Nazareth might be understood as a “pattern” or a symbol (I prefer the term “sacrament”) for what can take place in all of us (see 2.3.4.2), the Vatican erects a rock-solid barrier: “According to Christian belief, Jesus Christ is not a pattern, but a divine person whose human-divine figure reveals the mystery of the Father’s love for every person throughout history” (3.3) “In the Christian Tradition Jesus Christ is the Jesus of Nazareth about which the gospels speak, the son of Mary and the only Son of God, true man and true God, the full revelation of divine truth, unique Savior of the world.” (4)

I don’t think that Vatican theologians and dignitaries fully understand how haughty such standard Christological language sounds and feels for many Christians (and certainly for Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Jews). To insist that God’s self-communication to and identification with humanity has taken place *only* in Jesus, to require that Christians inform others that only *we* have the “unique Savior of the world,” to chide Christians for finding in Jesus the “pattern” by which they might identify their own potential - such demands appear to both the head and heart of many Christians as arrogant and profoundly antithetical to the kind of God Jesus experienced and proclaimed.

As the Asian Bishops in their Synod stated clearly and insistently, Christians in Asia (and not only in Asia) must find different ways - less haughty and more engaging ways - of speaking about the saving, universal message and presence of God-incarnate-in-Jesus. To insist that we have “the only Savior” or that only we have the “fullness” or the final criterion of God’s truth is to cut off possibilities of relationship and cooperation with others. It is to hamstring the mission of the Church.

Among both Asian and Western theologians, efforts are being made to get beyond this obstacle to mission - efforts to find ways of holding to both a full commitment to Christ Jesus and a genuine openness to other expressions of God’s saving truth, efforts to unpack and apply Rahner’s understanding of the incarnation in Jesus as the realization of the potential given to all humans, efforts to understand how the Christ can be fully identified with Jesus but not limited to Jesus. Admittedly,

such efforts need to be developed, and that means they need to be critically evaluated. But all we hear from this Vatican Document - and other recent Vatican statements such as *Dominus Iesus* - is rejection.

What we need in regard to the New Age movement - as well as in regard to so many other relationships of the "Church in the Modern World" (*Gaudium et Spes*) - is genuine dialogue. That means taking these new spiritualities more seriously, and more humbly. That means listening to their questions and not just rejecting their answers. That means being ready to learn something, which requires being ready to carry on the task of the development of dogma. But that is precisely what, in this Document, is not being done. Instead of dialogue, we have barriers.

What, then, can we do? We have to remind ourselves, I believe, that the People of God includes all of us, and imposes responsibilities on all of us, both hierarchy/magisterium on the one hand, and ordinary believers/theologians on the other. If barriers are being set up in Rome, we can search for answers and carry on dialogue in our local Churches. If our pastors aren't leading, we must try to help them by exploring, for the moment, new paths without them. This must be done carefully, prayerfully, humbly, and with as much dialogue as possible with our pastors.

What we here in the United States have recently realized applies, in different ways, to the universal Church. In the midst of the horrible scandal of sexual abuse by priests and cover-up by bishops, many American Catholics have come to the clear and challenging conclusion that laypeople and theologians must take more, and bolder, responsibility for the well-being of the Church. It must always be "co-responsibility" with the hierarchy, but especially at this juncture, laity and theologians must often be bold enough to take the lead in this relationship. In such co-responsibility lies the hope for our Church, whether in confronting scandal or in responding to the questions of our New Age.

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The Old Way of Facing the New Age

John B. Chethimattam

The document takes a pick-and-choose approach in describing the New Age thinking. Some of the insights of modern scientists, psychologists, sociologists and philosophers are disposed off with a one-line criticism. The sensitivity of the East to the working of divine grace is misrepresented in the document. The sophisticated way in which the Church Fathers integrated the Gnostic and Stoic insights with Christian faith could inspire Christians today in meeting the challenges of the New Age.

The recent Roman document *Jesus Christ Bearer of the Water of Life*, “A Christian Reflection on the ‘New Age’”, published by the Pontifical Council of Culture and the Pontifical Commission for Interreligious dialogue, as a “provisional report” deserves a creative response regarding its effectiveness in meeting the new challenge. Since it is “primarily intended for those engaged in pastoral work” one can first of all say that today “pasturing” is not a matter of simply feeding the “dumb sheep” but caring for a sophisticated public, which thanks to modern technology like that of the internet has at its fingertips the most nuanced information even on complex religious issues. As the document itself admits that the situation today is similar to the one faced by the early Church in the phenomenon of Gnosticism, there is reason to ask whether one has not to learn a great deal from the way the problem was resolved then.

Encounter of Christianity with the Intellectual Context

Christianity started as a reform movement in Judaism. So its first self-understanding was in opposition to the Judaic conception of religion as a sort of benevolent contract which God the conquering lord had entered with humanity and the six hundred and thirteen prescriptions of the Law into which the Scribes and Pharisees tried to reduce it. Jesus

proposed in their place the “Law of Love” in which all commandments were included. But it had also other rival religious systems to contend with, among which were the highly intellectual Greek religious thought of Heraclitus, Parmenides, Plato, Aristotle and others, the Oriental mysticism of Mithra, Osiris and Demeter, and the state religion of Rome. The Christian thinkers like Marcion, Valentinus, and Basilides tried to make a compromise with Greek intellectualism and mysticism by proposing Gnosticism. But Christian apologists like Justin, Tertullian, Iraenaeus, Clement and Origen found this suicidal to Christianity and vehemently attacked it: one group tried to meet the threat with a common sense answer while others called for a more sophisticated approach.

It is a similar context that Christians are facing today. According to the Roman document, the “New Age” writings, which respond to certain deeply felt psychological trends against patriarchy and burdens imposed on the individual, are actually using modern marketing techniques. As a consequence they have gained wide popularity especially in the spirit of relativism created by post-modern thinking. The document states: “There is in fact little in the New Age that is new... the reality it denotes is a contemporary variant of Western esotericism. This dates back to Gnostic groups which grew up in the early days of Christianity and gained momentum at the time of the Reformation in Europe”. (1.3). The main complaint against this modern gnosticism is that people do not feel the need to *belong* to institutions like the Church, nor are they inclined to rank *official judgements* above their own; there is less and less belief in a personal God, and the internalization of religion tends to celebrate the sacredness of the self, and promote attempts to liberate it through the process of evolution by natural selection and some sort of direct contact with the world of spiritual entities. It creates a kind of narcissistic spirituality, focussed on impersonal consciousness. The rejection of traditional theism is said to further the unilateral turn to the self and advancement of the individual. Faith itself is not supposed to demand any more effort than of going to the cinema.

Approaches to Gnosticism

The early Christian apologists saw the danger of Gnosticism proposed as it was by well known and highly respected Christian thinkers like Marcion, who was the son of a bishop and almost became the bishop of Rome, and Capocrates who was using as his text a longer version of

the Gospel allegedly written by St. Mark himself at Alexandria whither he had moved from Rome after the martyrdom of St. Peter. The first reaction, however, was that the highly intellectual interpretation proposed by Gnostics about Christ and his secret teachings allegedly communicated to some of the disciples could not be understood by ordinary Christians who were mostly illiterate. So St. Irenaeus advised people to remain faithful to the teachings of Christ, entrusted by the Apostles to the Churches they had founded, and uniformly taught everywhere by bishops. Fidelity to the universal tradition of the Church was the antidote to all heresies, which were mere speculation proposed by individuals. Jesus Christ was pictured in places of Christian worship as the Good Shepherd carrying the sheep on his shoulders. Tertullian drew the analogy from the blood sacrifices offered to Baal (Saturn) and Timit to argue that sacrificial blood was required to appease the anger of God and said that Jesus was the innocent sacrificial lamb offered for the sake of humanity. Justin in his many books addressed to emperor Marcus Aurelius, himself a respected philosopher, stated that Jesus was the Divine Wisdom (well known to ancients) become incarnate, and that Christians, his disciples, were philosophers. Others following the example of Philo, the Alexandrian Jew, who allegorized the Bible in order to make it acceptable to the the Greeks, tried to present the Biblical narratives in allegorical terms. Even the Epistle to the Hebrews in the New Testament had used this allegorical method to show that the Old Testament found its fulfilment in Jesus Christ and was superseded by him.

A need, however, was felt to meet the new challenge intellectually. The great disadvantage of the Christian message was the highly anthropomorphic language in which both Judaism and Christianity were communicated. The rational discourse of Greek religious thought had a great fascination for the sophisticated public. Good many gentiles, who embraced Christianity after a serious study of Greek philosophy abandoned the Biblical framework of discourse, especially its moral system and brought in wholesale the moral ideology of the Stoics, which eventually became the substance of Christian moral theology. Some of the Christian Sophists were well intentioned in presenting Christianity as a respectable and consistent world religion. They were using the same biblical texts as the orthodox to draw from them their own esoteric conclusions. They made fun of the bishops and deacons, who were

often ignorant of Greek philosophy and even illiterate, for maintaining traditional faith by mere external discipline. One of these illiterates was Demetrius, bishop of Alexandria from 189 to 232, with a strong support among the common people. He took the criticism of the Sophists seriously and opened a catechetical school close to his church. With eminent scholars like Pantaenus, Clement and Origen among its teachers the school played an important role in merging Catholic faith and philosophical reflection. All the three were well educated in Greek philosophical tradition. Pantaenus was well acquainted with India and the mission and martyrdom of Apostle Thomas there, and finally moved over there as a missionary. Clement knew about Eastern religions and calls Buddha a holy man divinized and venerated by his followers. Origen was a scholar well versed in the philosophical writings of the day. Firmly rooted in Christian faith these found Greek philosophy a great ally rather than an enemy in communicating the Gospel.

Clement argued that truth is not the monopoly of any particular group or individual, and that it is a great ocean into which flowed the wisdom of Brahmans, Buddhists, Chaldeans and Egyptians besides that of the Greeks. Though the Gospel can be grasped only through faith, philosophies are a great help in preparing the minds for it. He agreed with Heraclitus that the one goal of the world in constant flux is the immutable divine Logos, and stated that any philosophy that teaches righteousness can be understood as coming from God. But there is no guarantee that those who received such wisdom made proper use of it. That divine Wisdom was effectively communicated to humanity only when Jesus of Nazareth received Baptism in the river Jordan and the Spirit descended upon him. He was above all else the Word who was the instructor of divine life, like a priest putting off his old clothes and putting on the new garment. The believer through baptism does the same in becoming consecrated. Clement sought to put the mysteries of Christian faith in a universal philosophical framework that could be understood by those who were truly wise.

Similarly Origen was one of the great Platonists of his day considered equal to Plotinus, and he set the standard by which later Christian theology would be judged in its range and level of philosophical engagement. He also followed the allegorical method of the Alexandrians, and saw three meanings in texts of the Bible, literal, moral and allegorical. While the literal meaning stated what happened in the past, and the moral told

people how to behave, the highest and spiritual is the allegorical which revealed the inner reality of what one believed. The historical narratives merely presented the external coating and context of Jesus' teaching; what Jesus taught was the divine truth of the Logos acting as an intermediary between humanity and God.

Gnosticism died a natural death when the Christian apologists took over their positive insights and incorporated them to the common Christian message. Of course, there was the repressive measures by Constantine and other Byzantine emperors who saw in Gnostic writings an element disruptive of their political rule. But repression would have only driven them underground. Actually with the loss of popular interest the Gnostic writings themselves so completely disappeared that they are available today mostly from their extensive quotations in orthodox writers like Origen and Justin.

A Positive Approach to the Issues Raised by the New Age

What stands out clearly from the study of the ancient method of approach to Gnosticism is the inadequacy of a purely negative approach to its modern forms. Its earlier forms like Kant's *Religion within the Bounds of Reason*, or Renaissance Humanism are past history. There is no single school of philosophy or system that stands for the ideas listed under the "New Age". There are mostly individual writers stressing one or another idea of the whole bunch, and their ideas actually die with them. Picking one idea from one and another from another and creating a whole system out of them is taking them out of their actual context and making them look more consistent and respectable than they actually are. Criticism of individual writers of the "New Age" like Madame Blavatsky, William Bloom and Fritjof Capra, is not very helpful since they themselves change their own opinions or the same views are contradicted by others. It will be naive to dispose off the voluminous writings of C.G.Jung or William James in one-liner criticisms. They do not constitute stable systems or Churches. Besides one can do very little to clear the ground of all erroneous opinions by such a pick and choose criticism, when according to the *World Christian Encyclopedia* published in 1982 there are 20, 780 independent Christian Churches in the world, many other World Religions and thousands of new religious movements, each of which may emphasize an element of truth neglected or denied by others and yet claim that its explanation was the only true

one. Has not one, therefore, rather to focus attention on the important live issues that raise questions about the life and practice of Christians today. For example are not most of the critical observations made by *Orationis Formas* about Eastern methods of meditation and against rebuttal by competent scholars repeated again in the present document really question marks against implications of Christian prayer?

To take only a few examples: Where is the God we pray to? When on October 27, 1986 Pope John Paul II invited the world religious leaders to Assisi to pray for peace, Dalai Lama honestly asked: "To Whom shall I pray?" For Christians God is up there and out there, for Hindus He is in here. The Buddhist criticism is that this God "Out there" or "In here" cannot really be God, since when you put a plus between your individual self and the Infinite, that is no longer infinite and cannot be God but only an idol! The statement of *Orationis Formas* (#14), "Man is essentially a creature and remains so for all eternity, so that an absorption of the human I in the divine I will never be possible" simply misses the point. On the level on which God is, there is no human I to be "absorbed". No reasonable philosopher would ever claim that the finite 'I' is *absorbed* into the Infinite. The Buddhist point is that prayer is not a *tete-a-tete* with a Deity, but rather understanding and realizing the sheer nothingness or emptiness of the human individual self and of the whole phenomenal world! Here there is no question of pantheism or panentheism! From the barren land of the phenomenal world one enters the boat of *Dharma*. Buddha's teachings, and after crossing the stream of life abandons even the boat to *nirvana*! Then how is a personal relation with God possible? Aphrahat the Persian Sage in his *Demonstrations*, gave the answer: Once you realize the infinitude and incomprehensibility of God, and recognize yourself as only a shadow and similitude, you can call God anything, Father, Creator, beloved, friend etc. and there is only one way you can go namely towards the fullness of that similitude by identification with Jesus, the one Son, moving to the Trinitarian fellowship. For Greeks image or symbol could never become equal to reality, but for Easterns, especially Persians, image by its very nature was bound to attain its fullness in sonship!

What is Spiritual Life and Mysticism? According to *Jesus Christ the Bearer of the Water of Life* "For Christians the spiritual life is a relationship with God which gradually through his grace becomes deeper..." (3.4).

This may be a common sense psychological statement with a tinge of Pelagianism. No created being, however, can start a relationship with God and establish a claim against Him. Grace is needed not merely for deepening the relationship but for its very beginning. Have we not to recognize here the positive value of the New Age insight that spirituality is rather experiencing what the Transcendent God has accomplished in us, the states of consciousness and the harmony produced by the *Whole*?

The contrast between technique and method is rather irrelevant since even in the immanentist system techniques do not produce the realization of the Ultimate but only dispose one for it. Even in the Oriental mysticism for example of *Advaita*, human efforts can go only up to a point within the limits of the finite; then there is a total break, and the final realization comes as a flash from the One-alone-without-a-second! In Christian meditation too one has to use the proper methods to dispose oneself for the divine gift of prayer. The statement of the Roman document, "The essential element in Christian faith, however, is God's descent towards his creatures, particularly towards the humblest" (3.4) surely does not intend to deny that this divine "descent", even the Incarnation and the entry of the Son into human history is not a change in God nor in the Word of God, but only change on the creature's side. Hence in reality it is as the New Age writers say, the human enterprise of rising to the divine level by the power of the grace of God. Similarly salvation is not being pushed into heaven by the toiling hands of God but the creatures being enabled by the Spirit to participate actively in the suffering, death and resurrection of the Saviour!

Perhaps the most crucial question is Who is Jesus Christ? Surely "In the Christian tradition Jesus Christ is the Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of Mary and the only Son of God, true man and true God". (4.) Jesus is the divine mystery by which the one Son of God definitively entered human history. But an ever present danger was the tendency to absolutize the divinity and make Jesus a god by himself, virtually denying not only his real humanity but also his relation to the Father and the Spirit. Docetism, which said that the Son of God only appeared like man in Jesus, that he did not really suffer and die, was the first Christian heresy. The New Testament titles of Jesus were more functional than definitional. He was "Christ" the anointed, the Messiah, a title applied principally to kings, though it became almost a proper name for him. He was the

kyrios, the Lord and Master, a title with which the disciples addressed him. Son of God was a title applied not only to the one Son of God but also to kings and to Israel as a whole as a holy people. Jesus often applied to himself the title "Son of Man" to suggest not only his true humanity, but also the collective image of the just presented in the Prophecy of Daniel in the figure of the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven and receiving dominion and power from the Ancient of Days. "The Bearer of the Water of Life" in conversation with the Samaritan woman at the Jacob's well that forms the title of the Roman document is another such title. The twenty seven books of the New Testament have a good number of different christologies according to the different functions the writers of those books saw in Jesus. He was the pre-existent Logos in whom and by whom all things were created (Jn 1:1-3) and was before Abraham was born (Jn 8:58), and also the one shown to be the Son of God by being raised from death (Rom 1:4). But all these titles belong to the one Jesus of history, in whom the one Son was incarnate and entered human history. He is not a mere mystic who realized his total reality in the one divine essence, but the one in whom all humans are made sons and daughters of God. What the so called New Age writings just like the ancient books of the Nag Hamadi library try to emphasize is the diversity of functions included in the one Jesus. Religion is the Spirit-inspired human response to faith, which is God's gift to all his children. The New Testament books found this ideal of faith in the one Son culturally conditioned by their different christologies. This can make us appreciate why Buddhists found this ideal of faith in Buddha, the one Illumined regarding the unreality of the world, the Jains in Vardhamana Mahaveera, the one who crossed over the sea of life, and Hindus in Vishnu, by whom, from whom and in whom is everything! Those ideals of faith proposed by different religions, part of our one religious history and the common heritage of all humans, in response to different religious questions and in different cultural contexts, do not in any way deny the uniqueness of Jesus, who is the one Son in whom alone can all humans become sons and daughters of the Father in heaven!

San Thame
Kanyakumari

New Age, **Self-righteousness and Self-complacency**

Francis X. D'Sa

Many of the questions raised by the New Age thinkers are a genuine challenge to rethink the Church's traditional theology and spirituality. But the document seems to rely on the absolute premise that the hebrew-greek-roman worldview is the only framework valid for interpreting Christian faith, that the personalistic presentation of religion is the only way to the Divine. Such a self-righteous and self-complacent approach is not a help to guide those involved in pastoral care in today's pluralistic world.

Introduction

Jesus Christ The Bearer of the Water of Life: A Christian Reflection on the New Age is a longish document that purports to guide pastors.¹

"It is an invitation to understand the *New Age* and to engage in a genuine dialogue with those who are influenced by *New Age* thought. The document guides those involved in pastoral work in their understanding and response to *New Age* spirituality, both illustrating the points where this spirituality contrasts with the Catholic faith and refuting the positions espoused by *New Age* thinkers in opposition to Christian faith." (Nr.1)

Evidently the purpose of the exercise is multiple:

- a) To understand the *New Age*
- b) To engage in a genuine dialogue with those who are influenced by *New Age* thought

1 It would be interesting to know how many pastors will go through this document and study it.

- c) To guide those involved in pastoral work in their understanding and response to *New Age* spirituality.

Any attempt to understand any religion, culture or ideology is always laudable. Compared to information understanding is an altogether different proposition because understanding is basically a bridge-building enterprise. It is through understanding that we enter into the world of the other. But understanding is not the first step towards engaging in a genuine dialogue. It is the other way round; it is dialogue that helps promote understanding. When instead of dialoguing we become disputatious, no understanding will ever occur. The spirit of disputation, unlike that of discussion and clarification, is foreign to dialogue.

Laudable too is the intention to guide those involved in pastoral work in their understanding of and response to New Age spirituality. Our pastors need guidance on how to go about the new religious movements. In this age of information technology the enterprise of understanding the other, especially the other culture and the other religion, inevitably and lamentably gets short shrift and therefore takes a backseat. Hence guiding pastors in responding to New Age spirituality is to be highly commended.

Having said this however we immediately get a jolt because our document continues in a vein that is totally unexpected and, in the context of what has preceded, utterly strange (to say the least). For the document goes on to specify that the guidance consists in "both illustrating the points where this spirituality contrasts with the Catholic faith and refuting the positions espoused by New Age thinkers in opposition to Christian faith".² Evidently this throws up doubts about what has been said about genuine dialogue and understanding. In dialogue we may disagree (perhaps because we do not understand) but we certainly do not refute the positions espoused by the other!³ Dialogue does not mean we agree with whatever the dialoguing partner says or that we irenically give up our own position. If this were so, dialogue would be a farce, not a

2 My emphasis.

3 This kind of difficulty is not uncommon with Roman documents, where the right hand (one dicastery) does not know what the left hand does (another dicastery). One would expect that the one who finally edited the document would work out some sort of consistency and coherence in what has been stated in different sections of the document!

genuine sharing. In this regard we could take a cue from what the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue[PCID] said about its Methodology a few years ago in its self-introduction:

Dialogue is a two-way communication. It implies speaking and listening, giving and receiving, for mutual growth and enrichment. It includes witness to one's own faith as well as an openness to that of the other. It is not a betrayal of the mission of the Church, nor is it a new method of conversion to Christianity. This has been clearly stated in the encyclical letter of Pope John Paul II "Redemptoris Missio". This view is also developed in the two documents produced by the PCID: The Attitude of the Catholic Church towards the Followers of Other Religious Traditions: reflections on Dialogue and Mission (1984), and Dialogue and Proclamation (1991).

Our interpretation of the New Age document is not far from wrong because from beginning to end the document shows no trace of dialogue with and no effort to understand the followers of New Age. It is all the time pointing a finger at all the wrong doctrines they hold on to and all the practices that they are involved in. I have no intention at all of defending New Age and their followers. My point is consistency: the document aims at promoting "genuine dialogue" but at the same time promises the pastors it intends to guide with illustrations of doctrines contrary to the Christian faith (this is fair enough) and refutations the positions espoused by the New Age thinkers. The document would have saved itself a lot of trouble if it would have just omitted the points about understanding New Age and engaging in "genuine dialogue".

I realize, it is not quite easy to write about a document that that knows all the answers. Though our document *Jesus Christ The Bearer of the Water of Life: A Christian Reflection on the New Age* keeps on insisting that it is not easy to pinpoint what exactly *New Age* stands for it is not unaware that *New Age* is 'drawing crowds'. Though it does not say so it can come as no surprise to the members of the top-notch dicasteries that in comparison to *New Age* its own membership is rapidly dwindling in those "first-world" countries which *New Age* is exercising its fascination.

Speaks about everything and says nothing

At one point there is an honest admission (at least the only one I

found⁴) about *New Age* and it is this: "*New Age* is attractive mainly because so much of what it offers meets hungers often left unsatisfied by the established institutions." (1.1.)

The point that has touched a raw nerve in me (who have absolutely no knowledge of and no contact with *New Age* thinking,) is this: Many of the points that our Roman document is making seem to have people like me in mind. Why? Most of the themes that *New Age* stresses find a resonance in me.

a) Our document states: "*New Age* appeals to people imbued with the values of modern culture. Freedom, authenticity, self-reliance and the like are all held to be sacred. It appeals to those who have problems with patriarchy." (1.1.) I believe I too hold these values to be sacred and I too have problems with patriarchy.

b) Furthermore: "With this cult of humanity, religion is internalised in a way which prepares the ground for a celebration of the sacredness of the self... It is worth remembering that deviations within Christianity have also gone beyond traditional theism in accepting a unilateral turn to self..." (1.1.) Now being a student of the Hindu traditions, I too welcome the celebration of the sacredness of the self. I too as a Christian have gone beyond traditional theism because I believe in a trinitarian mystery. Besides we are told that "Christianity... is an invitation to look outwards and beyond, to the 'new advent' of the God who calls us to live the dialogue of love". I thought the orthodox trinitarian God calls us, as participants in the trinitarian perichoresis to look outwards and *inwards* and beyond.

c) "Basically," the document states, "*New Age* has found a remarkable level of acceptance because the world-view on which it was based was already widely accepted.. The ground was well prepared by the growth

4 The documents quotes the positive remarks of David Spangler who "is convinced that selfish, irrational narcissism is limited to just a few new-agers. The positive aspects he stresses are the function of *New Age* as an image of change and as an incarnation of the sacred, a movement in which most people are 'very serious seekers after truth', working in the interest of life and inner growth"; and the American Jesuit David Toolan who "observes that new-agers have discovered the inner life and are fascinated by the prospect of being responsible for the world, but that they are also easily overcome by a tendency to individualism and to viewing everything as an object of consumption." (3.2.)

and spread of relativism, along with an antipathy or indifference towards the Christian faith." The point is this: *New Age is meeting* "hungers often left unsatisfied by the established institutions". "...*New Age is* often a response to people's search for meaning and sense in life..." (2.) And what is the Roman Catholic Church doing about people's unsatisfied hungers and search for meaning and sense in life?

d) Again, "Here is what is 'new' about *New Age*. It is a 'syncretism of esoteric and secular elements'. They link into a widely-held perception that the time is ripe for a fundamental change in individuals, in society and in the world." (2.1.) I must confess that I too believe that the time is ripe for such a change.

e) Our document is right in stating that "What is actually going on is a radical change in world-view, which puts into question not only the content but also the fundamental interpretation of the former vision." However it goes on to add: "Perhaps the clearest example of this, in terms of the relationship between *New Age* and Christianity, is the total recasting of the life and significance of Jesus Christ. It is impossible to reconcile these two visions." (2.1.) While this may be true of the way both sides are stating the case now, I can very well imagine a time with less rigid and more poetic ways of expressing would change the scenario dramatically.⁵ I merely refer the reader to Raimon Panikkar's book *The Fullness of Man* which speaks of Christophany, not merely of Christology. Christology speaks of teachings and doctrines but Christophany aims at communicating the mystical experience of Jesus Christ.⁶ Christophany does not reject Christology, it transcends, that is, goes beyond Christology. Now this is really a paradigm shift in the way we look at Jesus Christ.

f) Our document speaks of *New Age's* concern with angels (2.2.1.), with being in tune with nature or the cosmos. (2.2.2.), with health and healing (2.2.3) and, above all, with wholeness (2.2.4). To the last it adds a subtitle "A Magical Mystery Tour". I am not acquainted with *New Age* beliefs but the way our document speaks of these themes it is clear that they are not its cup of tea. But I must not deny that I resonate

5 I do not equate "poetic" with "romantic". Poetic comes from *poesis*, that which makes sense, that which gives meaning in life.

6 *The Fullness of Man* is being published by Orbis (Maryknoll) and is a translation of the Italian original *La pienezza dell'uomo. Una cristofania* (Milano: Jaca Book, 1999).

very much with themes and find that the rationalistic influence of the enlightenment on our document is considerable. If the world is God's creation then is it not the right thing to discover angels everywhere, to be in tune with the cosmos and to realize wholeness? "Holism pervades the *New Age* movement, from its concern with holistic health to its quest for unitive consciousness, and from ecological awareness to the idea of global 'networking'." (2.2.4.) I find this very positive - perhaps because of the Hindu ambience in which we live. The holism I believe in does not of course overlook distinctions but aims to overcome separations and dualisms.

The universe of *New Age*, it is alleged, is closed and contains "God" and other spiritual beings along with ourselves - here, we are told, is implicit pantheism. This need necessarily be so. The authors of our document who are probably not acquainted with Panikkar's cosmotheandric vision (which offers a thorough re-vision of our "understanding" of the three centres of reality⁷) probably believe that the hebrew-greek-roman articulations of the Christic experience are the only possible ones. Christic experience has to be expressed in a catholic (*kat'holos*) manner, i.e. in as many cultural and linguistic worlds as is possible. This excludes mere translations of the hebrew-greek-roman formulation. Look at Panikkar's revolutionary way of revising our presuppositions: "God, Man and World are three artificially substantivized forms of the three primordial adjectives which describe Reality."⁸

Contrast this with the way our document discusses what *New Age* says about the human person, God and the world. It keeps on harping that *New Age* is much influenced by eastern religions, the theosophists, Jung, etc., etc. What is wrong if one takes over elements which "make sense" in one's world of belief? Furthermore, personalistic approach in religion is not the only kind of religion. The human being is a cosmotheandric mystery where body, soul and spirit constitute three dimensions to which specific kinds of spirituality correspond.⁹

7 *The Cosmotheandric Experience. Emerging Religious Consciousness.* (Ed.) Scot Eastham (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993); Indian edition Delhi: Motilal, 1998).

8 Panikkar, "Philosophy as Life-Style", *Philosophers on Their Own Work*. Vol. IV (Bern, etc.: Peter Lang, 1978), p.206. For his justification of the expression Man see his *The Fullness of Man*. Man, for Panikkar, is always more than Man; Man is a theandric mystery!

9 See Panikkar, *Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man* (London: Darton

Due to lack to space I shall merely summarize my observations about the manner in which our document goes about dealing with *New Age* and its beliefs. But before I proceed, let me repeat. I am not making a plädoyer for *New Age*; I am neither their advocate nor their adversary.

a) Our document nowhere makes an effort to understand *New Age* and its beliefs. On the contrary, it is quick to point out what it considers to be its shortcomings. One who is keen on "genuine dialogue" with and understanding the other does not follow this path; one would rather say that it does not resonate with its beliefs.

b) Our document seems to overlook the fact that most of the time it is "examining" the beliefs of another "faith-world". Beliefs unlike concepts belong to the realm of symbolic language and emerge from a experience of the world of symbols. Concepts can be analysed and dissected. The same verbal formulation is for the insider a belief and for the outsider a concept. Treating the beliefs of another faith-world as concepts is the worst form of injustice one can do to a religious tradition.

c) One does not have to agree with another religion but one must have the humility to admit that one stands outside that religion and therefore is unable to appropriate its beliefs.

d) Our document has all the answers probably to all the questions but does not realize that its answers are mostly irrelevant. For instance, in reply to its question "Why as *New Age* grown so rapidly and spread so effectively?" it says "New Age is an attempt by people who experience the world as harsh and heartless to bring warmth to that world. As a reaction to modernity it operates more often than not on the level of feelings, instincts and emotions." (2.5) If this is so, why does our document not say *mea culpa* and resolve to bring more warmth and heart to our own answers? What hinders us from learning from them to make our response to the problems of our age more holistic, more relevant and yes, more appealing?

e) The section '3.3. The Cosmic Christ' is replete with monocultural assumptions bound up with the belief in *history* and in a *personal* God. While I have no objections to this, I cannot accept them to the exclusion of any other understanding of history and of the Divine Mystery. Elsewhere I have shown that the absolutization of *anthropic* history is

one-sided, that it needs to be complemented by *karmic* history and that both need to be transcended because history (whether anthropic or karmic) does not constitute the whole of Man.¹⁰

Conclusion

Those responsible for the document *Jesus Christ the Bearer of the Water of Life: A Christian Reflection on the New Age* (could one have a more contrived title this is!) are surely entitled to their views but it is neither an irenic nor a dialogical spirit that animates the document. Instead of guiding pastors the document will probably misguide them and it will in no way be a help to dialogue. Where it is bound to succeed is in deepening prejudices and creating the impression that the Catholic community is not open to dialogue.

The reason for this is to be sought in the fact that the document is thoroughly self-righteous and self-complacent. Self-righteous because it is thoroughly convinced that its formulation of the Christian experience alone is right and that there can be no other formulation not only of the Christian experience but of any experience of the Divine. It has found all the answers. The result is a very high degree of self-complacency in spite of the fact of dwindling numbers and increasing irrelevance.

It is hardly surprising then that it never poses the question, "What are we doing wrong, where are we going wrong, what could we do to satisfy the spiritual longing of people?"

May I illustrate this with the following report which appeared in *Zenit*:

"The Church can counter that phenomenon [of *New Age*], says Legionary Father Paolo Scarafoni, by proclaiming Jesus Christ 'living and risen,' 'whose person has greater fascination than any other' and who fills life with meaning. Father Scarafoni, who is also Rector of the Regina Apostolorum Pontifical Athenaeum, was one of the speakers at last Friday's worldwide videoconference on 'The Church, New Age and Sects,' organized by the Congregation for Clergy."¹¹

10 Cfr. , F.X.D'SA, Karmische und Anthropische Geschichte, in: Zeitschrift für Missions- und Religionswissenschaft 87:3 (2003), 163-180.

11 ZE04030220 referred to www.clerus.org

Father Scarafoni, like the document *Jesus Christ The Bearer of the Water of Life: A Christian Reflection on the New Age*, has answers to problems that have been baffling us who are engaged in dialogue work all our life long. Some of us have been struggling to understand and communicate with the other religious traditions. In the process we find ourselves constantly in doubt whether we have understood them correctly, that is, as they understand themselves. Father Scarafoni and the writers of the document are in a sense in an enviable position since they are free from all the kinds of doubts that people like me (who study other religions) are subject to. Their response is simple and straightforward: "Proclaim Jesus Christ 'living and risen' and whose person has greater fascination than any other and who fills life with meaning". One wonders whether they have read or even heard of that extraordinary person called the Buddha and his millions and millions of human beings down the centuries whose life he has filled with meaning.

For all I know, New Age may not be a blessing but surely self-righteousness and self-complacency will be a curse wherever they are found!

Jnana Deepa Vidyapeeth

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Is New Age Wisdom Provisional?

George Pattery

Since the *Enlightenment* science has been divorced from religion. The western crisis of faith is the result of this. To meet this situation New Age brings up the perspectives of harmony. The Vatican document does not seem to understand this concern. It fails to make a methodological distinction between Western rational categories and the tenets of Christian faith. Consequently the document tries to meet the questions of the New Age with the western dogmatic categories. This is a futile attempt.

In a piece titled "temporary matter" (*Interpreter of Maladies*) Jhumpa Lahiri tells the story of Sukumar and Shoba, young couple at the point of divorce. It so happened that during a very trying period of their married life, there was an unusual power failure for a few days in their adopted city of New Hampshire. As there was no electricity, they could not escape into their private worlds of computer and TV. They had to struggle in order to say something to each other during power-cuts. Then Sukumar recalled how back in Calcutta, when the lights went off, as children they would listen to their grandmother telling them stories. Shoba caught on to that, and suggested that they would tell each other something that they haven't told before. They looked forward to the evenings without electricity when they could hear something new about from each other. Eventually they rediscovered each other. "They wept together, for the things they now knew." Telling one another things that we didn't tell before can reveal ourselves anew. Could this happen to the Catholic Church? Has the Catholic Church with an aged Europe as its geographical centre something new to tell the world? Has it only the age-old 'rationalizations' to keep the belief intact? Has it reached a point of divorce with the so-called secular world? These were some of the questions that welled up in me as I read the document on 'New Age'

(All references to the document are from 'Jesus Christ Bearer of the Water of Life, Mumbai: Pauline Publications, 2003. Henceforth cited as NA).

Accounting for One's Faith

The major contribution of the document is the very attempt at 'fundamental theology' – of dialoging with the contemporary concerns and ideologies. The document perceives the hunger and thirst of men and women today for a kind of spirituality that makes sense to them. In trying to appreciate this thirst, the document is in a genuine sense 'giving account of' the Christian faith. The second major contribution of the document is its ability to acquaint itself with the various nuances and documentation on 'the New Age'. Although it tends to unilaterally abstract the essence of New Age teaching, document gives sufficient references for further study and discussion on the question. The proliferation of the sources of information and the easy access of material from the Internet rather compels the document to be at the service of the media. Thirdly by citing various features of the New Age, it invites all to serious intellectual dialogue, an aspect that is often played down by the proponents of New Age. To be fair to the document, one must admit that the document does challenge the New Age with some serious questions (albeit drawn from the traditional Christian position) and they are worth probing, especially in the context of globalization. Three major concerns are: i) that New Age does not have the intellectual cogency to explain the cosmos and opts for facile 'harmony' ignoring the problems of one and the many; ii) that New Age imports Eastern religious practices to suit Westerners and it chooses neutral language avoiding concepts of sin and salvation; iii) that New Age advocates prosperity techniques for better productivity, but is unconcerned about 'common good'. (NA.p.46).

Final Word on Christian Faith?

Do all these justify the stand of the document? I think not. Let us look at the document from South Asian perspective. The document, it seems to me, is trying to define 'New Age' into a system and evaluate it in traditional Western Christian categories. New Age however is more a perspective than a system. It is a holistic perspective that looks for harmonious approach to reality. One wonders whether one can really object to a holistic approach to life in the name of Christianity. Second

major lacuna in the document is that it is not able to make a methodological distinction between Western rational categories and the tenets of Christian faith. The formulation of Christian faith in traditional Western categories is valid and significant but need not be the touchstone of Christian faith. Let us pick up some of the issues that the New Age is posing that could be left open ended and inviting, rather than closing. In studying a movement like New Age, the traditional approach of 'dogmatic treatment', would not suffice; a more sociological and cultural study is required in order to bring out the full significance of the necessity, impact and relevance of New Age thinking. Such an approach is wanting in the document. Besides, the attempt in the document is to posit Christian faith and tradition against the New Age thinking. This is insufficient.

What is known as Christian faith-symbols and traditions and rituals predate Christianity, cross being the obvious example. These were borrowed from and adapted to (western) Christian perspective and were accepted as Christian. Does that mean that the inculturation process ended with Western Christian symbols and traditions? Can't the ongoing unfolding of Christic mystery interact with other traditions and cultures allowing new faith symbols and traditions to emerge? Can we once and for all determine the canonicity of rituals, traditions and cultural expressions as we did with scriptural texts? Starting from the creation myth in Genesis to the social institutions of kings to the architecture of the Jerusalem temple, Biblical faith progressed through dynamic interaction with the movements and cultures of the time. By putting skeptical note on 'holistic health, unitive consciousness, ecological awareness and global networking' the document is trying to insulate Christian faith from the contemporary search and findings; this is unfortunate. This way we prematurely close the organic development of Christian faith and imply that the final word on the development of Christian faith and doctrines has already been uttered. The New Age document deplores the attraction for acupuncture, biofeedback, massage, bodywork, meditation and music. This is seen as a distrust of reason and conventional medicine. Thus the document seems to presuppose that western rationality and its medicinal approach are binding on Christian faith. It is to be admitted that the achievements of science, medicine and technology manifest the progress of human intelligence and creativity as cited by *Gaudium et Spes*. Does that mean we have to disown the traditional ways and holistic 'reason' of the non-European

traditions? In the past often these have been colonized by the West and often in the name of Christianity.

At the academic level, the inventions of gunpowder by the Chinese, zero by the Arabs and the achievements of Indian ayurveda have questioned the claims of western rationality as the arbiter of modern science and progress. If certain colonial concept of rationality and a partial scientism have been questioned by the rediscovery of traditional approach to life, should that be deplored in the name of Christianity? Instead shouldn't we allow the traditional wisdom to replenish our depleted resources of scientism? Shouldn't Christian sacramental feel more at home with the holistic perspective that is being rediscovered? Were not many western monasteries, centres of holistic approach to life adopting European rural cultural wisdom of the time? Is the main objection to New Age movement stemming from the fact that these often come from other religious traditions that are ancient and resilient and are from the so-called third world? It is the strength of some of the ancient Indian religious practices like yoga that they are tested and proven scientific means for holistic health (if science is understood in its genuine sense) and have been religiously integrated. These cultures do not find an opposition between science and religion. This does not however mean that its religious reception always meant a full knowledge of its scientific value nor its scientific relevance always meant its religious faith. The great Indian religious traditions sought wisdom that is scientific and religious and in that process did not have to go through the trajectory of the division and opposition between science and religion as happened in European enlightenment. For the latter, such an opposition is sign of modernity and progress, and envisage that every culture and civilization should necessarily go through this European phase.

The present document reflects more of an European ideology than a Christian response to a genuinely human phenomenon. The trouble with New Age document is that its cut-off point seems to be European enlightenment rationality; valid as it is, it is much too dominant and partial to be valid for all the ages to come. Christian tradition need not be tied down to European concept of rationality. Post-modernism has already challenged the modernist attempts at over-arching theories to explain reality. In spite of its claim of enlightenment rationality, Catholic Church compromised with fascism and failed at the altar of anti-Semitism

leading to holocaust. New age movement is the symptom of the failure of a one-sided rationality and of a dogmatic theology that is exclusively based on such rationality.

Instead of insulating 'Christianity' from the influences of New Age, the document should have addressed the issues of steady decline of traditional religious practices and yet renewed interest in relevant spirituality in Europe and America; it should address the theological dilemma of academic treatment of theological issues and the general indifference to religious practices and institutions, dogmatic propositions and theoretical arguments. The moderns look at the behaviour of the Church rather than its theoretical clarity; when people are ignorant of traditional Christian symbols and rituals, theoretical clarifications do not suffice. People look for more personal and conscious forms of religious groups, whereas traditional Christian structures remain static. The document fails to address real issues raised by the New Age movement and limits itself to give solutions using traditional Christian vocabulary. It is said that in the case of East Europe, the Church survived there due to the dynamic presence of Christians groups that lived more personally and in small and more visible groups than due to the strength or resistance of the official Church; after all the official Church was not unambiguous in its response to communism. New Age movement poses challenges to the structure and institutions of the church, but it may not be a threat to Christian spirituality as such.

A Privatized and Invisible Religion?

The document is right in its concern about the 'privatization and invisibility of religion'. However, this need not be seen as primarily a religious phenomenon. It is more a sociological phenomenon and a result of a liberal and consumerist life-style and ideology. Technology and media have advanced to bring the whole world into the privacy of one's bedroom at the click of a mouse. It makes on the one hand the whole world visible to you at will and on the other hand can make you invisible to the whole world and privatize your life. Similarly, a throwaway culture lives on a non-ending and ever-renewing consumerist mind-set. When life is thus privatized and made invisible, is it not natural that religion, which is part and parcel of life, is also privatized? The New Age movements are in fact helping people to make religion visible and effective in smaller live-in groups and thus providing a window to the otherwise

privatized invisible modern style of life. The document, instead of relying fully on enlightenment rationality, should critique the one-sided logic of liberal consumerism, and review the structures of religious institutions within the Church that need to be reformulated.

Can't we envisage smaller, interest-based, participatory communities other than/within the parish? Could the sacraments be conceived and celebrated in more holistic, participatory way so that grace becomes tangible to the needs of people? If language-game has its own rules and behaviour patterns, can religious experience be conveyed through overtly 'linguistic' formulations? Is language inherent and innate in the humans so much so that one can never think of a fundamental experience outside language? Is it time to think of a non-linguistic religion? How do we enable the silence of the words be heard? Church's worship is intrinsically social and it suited well when religion was essential for social cohesion. When religion is no more the principal agent of social cohesion and when social stability itself is being redefined by technology and media, how do we enable dynamics of faith to function? To my mind these are the larger and vital questions that the document could address, and let us hope that a more thorough and appreciative approach will follow in the next part of the document.

Provisionality of the document

This is a combined document of four dicasteries of Culture, Dialogue, Evangelization and Unity. That in itself is no small achievement. I wonder what the thrust of the document would be if the 'justice and peace' commission were to be consulted? Has the document done justice to other religions and cultures? This is the result, we are told, of the common reflection on the New Religious Movements. The present document cannot be called a document in the strict sense, as it is a **provisional report**. We could expect a more thorough and in-depth approach on the issue. What is more interesting is the provisionality of a Vatican document. Couldn't we say so about all the documents from the Vatican? Are not all our formulations time and space bound? Shouldn't we place the Vatican documents in their historical, cultural and social settings? In a sense S. Asia claims to live in a new age since it got political independence around fifty years ago. Does 'New Age' movements refer to all that comes from the geographically new age countries? The document does not really imply that. Nor does it clearly

define the term New Age. It admits that New age is responding to some spiritual hunger of contemporary men and women; but deplores the lack of perception of one's own traditions, implying Christian traditions. It can be stated clearly that the sentiments of *Gaudium et Spes* - 'nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in the hearts of the followers of Christ' - is missing in the approach of this document.

Conclusion

Certain concerns of the Document deserve our attention. There is tendency to relegate religious institutions, practices and organized ceremonies to the background and focus on the individual and on the vibrations that are often interpreted for private well-being. The social concern and implications of religious faith are ignored. Such an approach leaves social dimensions of living to social institutions other than religion. Secondly such a privatized approach also gives up the need to articulate religious faith and to account for it. It shuns serious philosophical and theological discussions and debate and takes up an anti-intellectual stand. Such a stand is too privatized and is intended to avoid any sort of accountability to experimentations. It ignores the riches and relevance of traditions and the wisdom of the past.

However it is rather ironic that the document that deplores the anti-intellectualism of New Age Movement, falls back on the imagery of *Bearer of Water of Life* to describe Jesus. Hence one could say that the title of the document is itself the best approbation of what New Age movement is trying to convey, namely a more symbolic, visible and palpable representation of the Ultimate. New age is attempting to give visibility to the Sacred to a world that is overrun by technological immediacy, consumerist phenomenalism and institutionalized religion. Perhaps New Age Movement is the best bet for the survival of religious faith for this century. The right approach to this phenomenon, it looks to me, is the Ignatian dictum: *find God in all things and in all things God*. We are invited to discover a God who labours in the world through the struggles, joys and aspirations of this world. The labouring God of the New Age Movement may not rejoice with this document.

New Age - a Challenge or Threat?

Paul Puthanangady

The document is written with a mono-cultural theological framework that got developed in the West. The New Age however addresses a phenomenon that embraces many cultures and takes inspiration from the diversity of religions. Hence the New Age has to be taken as a creative challenge to respect diversity of religions, variety of cultures and hence plurality of theologies in the Church.

Starting with Jesus, Christianity had always to confront the human society with its philosophies, religions and socio-political situations. These confrontations have been seen sometimes as challenges, at other times as threats. How to distinguish a challenge from a threat? When the opposition is against a dynamic, living reality like a community or a movement or a person who is driven by an ideology, we have a challenge; instead, if the opposition is against a static reality, like an institution or an autocratic political regime or a fanatic religious system, keen on maintaining status quo and afraid to face the future, we have a threat. Jesus and the early Christian community faced opposition coming from political systems and ideologies as a challenge; as a result Christianity blossomed forth triumphantly in the face of oppositions. The very forces that opposed contributed much to its vitality. The phenomenon which we call today the 'New Age' can become a source of greater dynamism and creatively beneficial to the Church and the Christian community, if we look at it as a challenge rather than as a threat.

1. The reasons for the negative attitudes towards "New Age spirituality"

Some of the statements, thought patterns and spiritual currents promoted by the New Age do contain elements, which can undermine the orthodoxy and the belief system of the Catholic Church. But at the same time, it is necessary to admit that these dangers are highlighted

using interpretations from a perspective, which is exclusively from a particular philosophical and cultural point of view; perhaps these truly intended by their proponents. Looking at them from more positive viewpoints, they could be considered as contributions for a better Christian life. I would like now to point out some of the hidden trends in the institutional Church of today, which may have been the cause of these negative attitudes towards this modern movement, as expressed in the document "Jesus Christ the bearer of the water of Life: A Christian reflection on the 'New Age'".

a) Western cultural frame of Christianity

For centuries a mentality that identifies Christianity with its western cultural frame has been considered as the only authentic interpretation of the Gospel. Although in some of the official documents that position has been withdrawn, there is no denying that the subconscious of the Catholic institutional Church is still somewhat conditioned by this monocultural approach to the Gospel. As a result whatever does not fall within the categories of this culture are looked upon with suspicion. The document says that the influence of these new movements can be controlled if "Christianity's rich symbolism and its artistic, aesthetical and musical traditions" which are unknown to many people of today are made known to them (no.6, 2). What is meant by 'Christianity's rich symbolism is nothing else but the Gospel values expressed through western cultural expressions. Could they not be expressed through other cultural expressions and be equally or even more fruitfully effective for people who come into contact with the Gospel from various cultures and life situations today and tomorrow?

b) Aristotelian – Scholastic thought pattern as the only valid philosophical tool for the interpretation of the Gospel

In the process of explaining and understanding the message of the Gospel, every human system of thought has a legitimate role to play. The only thing that must be taken care of is that there be no distortion of the original message; diversity in understanding can be the result of the unfolding of the same truth in a variety of ways, thus manifesting the richness of its content. Can we rule out some particular interpretations of the Gospel totally, just because they do not conform to the one interpretation, which has been given by a particular philosophical system?

c) Ignoring the emergence of a New World, which challenges our traditional monolithic world vision

Vision is something dynamic. Holy Spirit is active in it, although the

limitations of the human persons as well as their sinfulness and ignorance can distort it. Being dynamic, as we journey in life and history, new horizons appear. It is necessary to take this changing scenario seriously. The 'New Age' phenomenon is one of the expressions of this emerging new world.

d) Not taking into account the new understanding of religions and their relationship with Christianity

Some of the elements that are negatively viewed by the document have come from other religious traditions. Even though there can be deviations in the formulation of these religions, we cannot devalue their contribution to God-experience. This is true especially in the case of certain helps, which they have offered for prayer and meditation.

e) A particular institutional expression of the Church as absolute

Genuine institutionalization consists in incarnating the Gospel in human cultures. In a multicultural world this will take a variety of forms. The authenticity is not measured by using one particular style of institutionalization as the norm for all the others. The Gospel and the communities of believers in the Gospel are the only criteria for our evaluation.

2. The New Age as a challenge and as an opportunity

In all the human efforts to interpret both the personal experiences and the biblical passages, there is always the possibility of falling into ambiguities and even of misunderstanding them. What is important is to read into the interpreters' mind and discern what is correct and authentic from what may be wrong and unorthodox; quite often these contain challenges, provide incentives for a better understanding of the text or the experience itself. Looking at the statements and propositions of those who propagate the New Age with this attitude, we might be able to find there certain challenges and incentives for new interpretations of some of the doctrinal statements and spiritual guidelines which we have held for a long time as the only true orientations in a spirit of fidelity to the tradition. I would like to point out some of the challenges, which the proponents of the New Age are offering us.

a) Nobody can deny that some of our faith formulations have been too intellectual and conceptual in their expressions. No doubt, this was done with a view to give clarity to revealed truths. However, God who communicates these truths is a God of love; He speaks out of love. The experiential and emotional dimension should have played an important role in the presentation of Divine truths. "The gulf between faith and

experience is one of the fundamental reasons for the present-day crisis among Christians who are faithful to the Church" (Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: the experiment of Jesus as Lord*, New York 1981, pg 29). The New Age with its insistence on the role of experience in faith communications is inviting the Church to take this aspect of revelation and faith into consideration. It is true that there can be at times incorrect understanding and interpretation when we deal with a knowledge in which experience comes into play, just as there can be errors and unorthodox formulations when human intellect tries to understand and express the truths. Hence, while keeping a close watch on the deviations, it is necessary to allow the unfolding of the contents of revelations, which new ways of interpretation, such as knowing and understanding through experience etc., offers us.

b) Truths of faith should liberate the human person from all that keeps him or her slave to a particular form of thought or philosophical system. Jesus came to offer the truth that liberates, while teaching of the Jewish leaders of his time were enslaving because they were caught up in a monolithic thought pattern. The New Age expresses this need for freedom. Perhaps the formulation of revealed truth and the experience of the risen Christ are at times caught up in a particular manner of expression, in the style of living ministry and in the fulfillment of the ministry. Evidently, if the Church wants to look at herself with this hermeneutics of suspicion, she will have to cultivate a spirit of both openness and discernment; this will also involve risks. However, it is worth taking this risk because it can open up new vistas and wider perspectives in the formulation of Christian revelation and experience. The Holy Spirit is surely there to assist the Church even as she gets involved in the human society which is journeying through history with its ambiguities, towards its final destiny envisaged in the loving plan of God.

c) The mission of the Church is to evangelize the world. The goal of evangelization is fullness of union among human beings and with the Triune God (John 17:20-21). This is going to be realized in the communion of diversities. The New Age, in spite of its possible deviations, can contribute towards the creation of a rich diversity, which will enhance the beauty of communion for which we all are longing.

d) By being 'the living water' Jesus reveals to humanity the ineffable love of the Father. This water flows from the heart of Jesus who has included everyone in his loving embrace. Can he not give this living water in different ways and forms? Can he not make use of the waters

of our country and turn it into living water for the peoples of this land who are longing and seeking to quench their thirst in diverse ways? Let us make sure that we do not make this water become stagnant by its being within the limits of a particular culture or experiential category or a philosophical system. He is the Lord of the universe; he is free to manifest himself in the way he wants. The Spirit of Jesus is present all over the world and in every culture, not be bound by any one particular thought pattern or symbolic system in the fulfillment of his mission of reminding the world of all that Jesus said and did (John 14:26; 16:13).

e) At this juncture one might ask: what would be the criterion for distinguishing the orthodox from the unorthodox, the authentic from the spurious. Jesus has given us the criteria: from the fruit you will know the tree (Mt. 12:33). Unfortunately at times we do not apply this in our process of discernment. Instead of finding the quality of the tree from the fruit, we go to find its authenticity from its root, that is, the place where it grows, the persons who planted it, the country where it is growing etc. We forget the saying of St. Paul: "I planted, Apollos watered, but it is God who gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives growth" (1Cor. 3:6-7)

Conclusion

I do not intend to glorify all the statements and propositions of the proponents of the New Age. Certainly there are some direct statements as well as indirect implications which Christians cannot accept in their writings. At the same time it is not necessary to highlight too much all the possible deviations, which one can bring out from these statements using a certain philosophy as a tool. If in practice, some of the suggestions given by the promoters of the New Age help people to pray better, experience Christ more personally, we should be very cautious in pronouncing a negative judgment on them because we could run the risk of going against the Spirit who blows where he chooses (John 3:8). The Roman document on the New Age should have highlighted the positive contributions which this new trend could make for Christianity's becoming more relevant for modern man and woman. Then the negative elements, which are, no doubt, present in it, would have been better understood and more carefully avoided by the faithful.

Static Categories to Meet a Dynamic Religious Phenomenon ?

Errol D'Lima

The document is not a help to have a genuine dialogue with the proponents of the New Age. The document finds fault with several assumptions of the New Age thinking. But it does not honestly and self-critically reflect on the challenges New Age is positing on traditional Christian theology: questions concerning transcendence of God, situational ethics, revelation in other religions, structural sin, cosmic world-view, rebirth etc. The static categories of traditional dogmatics are not enough to meet the challenges of a dynamics religious phenomenon.

The Function of Institutional Religion

Religion seeks to offer people a way of life that brings them full self-realization or ultimate fulfillment. It offers a perspective from which an individual can interpret his/her situation in the world or cosmos and respond to the challenges of life especially when radical changes take place in the world or crisis-moments occur in people's lives. Religion offers a *Weltanschauung* (worldview) that takes into account life in this world and beyond. In this worldview, the experience of the divine, afterlife and its attainment, ethical living and cult is woven into the everyday life of a person. This is especially true of mainline religions that boast large numbers of believers and clearly articulated theologies of human existence.

The Aim of the Pontifical Document (PD)

Christianity offers its adherents the perspective that Jesus Christ proclaimed in his words and deeds; further, it recognizes in Jesus Christ God's unique communication and commitment to the world of people. The Church witnesses to this salvific communication in the history of

the world. The reflections in the 'provisional report' on the "New Age" by the different Pontifical Councils seek "to explain how the *New Age* movement differs from the Christian faith" and invite "readers to take account of the way that *New Age* religiosity addresses the spiritual hunger of contemporary men and women." The document begins by identifying aspects constitutive of or associated with New Age; it then contrasts New Age with Christian faith as set down in the gospel of Jesus. Finally, it offers Christians both guidance and practical advice when faced with New Age alternatives.

The Aim of New Age

New Age does not have a formal beginning. It does not begin with a historical person, or with a universally recognized event like a world war or a systematic thought process. It reflects a sense of dissatisfaction with "what is" and reaches out for an alternative. New Age thinking views mainline religions, authority structures and struggles that bring pain and suffering to humans and the ecology as boundaries in life that must be transcended. However, unlike the disillusionment of the 1960s that espoused a culture of drugs, free sex and anti-authoritarianism as an antidote to events in Vietnam and the Cold War's balance of terror, New Age seeks to promote harmony, peace and spirituality which sustains the world of humans.

Initial Reflections on the Document

a) Since New Age adherents are located mainly in Europe and America, we could assume that most of them are persons looking for an alternative to the Christianity that is practised. The Pontifical Document (PD) makes little effort to examine and discover the reasons why these persons are looking for an alternative. Could it be that the existing Christianity is a pale shadow of the authentic Christianity proclaimed in the gospels? Would not people then look for an alternative? Could it be that the efforts of the Christian Churches are directed more to exercising control over peoples' lives rather than challenging them to a gospel way of life that liberates?

b) The document creates a context of its own in which it begins to examine and explain New Age events. The context acquires meaning from an intra-Church discourse. It is a moot point if the claims made in the document about New Age are valid when PD engages in a discourse

that is intra-Church rather than in one shared by the Church and New Age. In the document, New Age is shown as wanting to displace formal religion and Christianity in particular. It concludes that the New Age "stance towards Christianity is not neutral, but neutralizing: despite what is often said about openness to all religious standpoints, traditional Christianity is not sincerely regarded as an acceptable alternative." (6.1) Is the Church projecting an image of New Age that emerges from an intra-Church discourse alone or from a discourse shared by the Church and New Age?

c) One of the key presumptions of New Age is that we are living in an evolving world of pluralism and if institutionalized religion (Christianity) refuses to take stock of the present situation in the world, then it will not be able to understand and answer new questions that are framed by seekers. Vatican II (1962-65) invested the faith commitment of the Christian with a new agenda in the mission of proclaiming the salvific message of Christianity. Implicit in that agenda was the acknowledging of pluralism in the world, and the consequent need for reinterpreting the Christian message through dialogue for each new situation. *Gaudium et Spes* was forthright in its support for dialogue:

In virtue of its mission to spread the light of the gospel's message over the entire globe, and to bring all people of whatever nation, race or culture together into the one Spirit, the Church comes to be a sign of that kinship which makes genuine dialogue (*dialogum*) possible and vigorous (92).¹

Already in his first encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* (1964), Pope Paul VI had the following to say about dialogue:

It is demanded by the dynamic course of action which is changing the face of modern society. It is demanded by the pluralism of society, and by the maturity the human has reached in this day and age (78).

d) The recognition by the Christian Churches that New Age phenomena are drawing persons away from the traditional Churches

1 GS 40 also says: "Everything that we have said about the dignity of the human person, the community of women and men and the significance of human activity provides ground for the relationship between the church and the world and a basis for mutual dialogue (*dialogi*)."

should suggest an opportunity for dialogue rather than confrontation. Instead, recourse is had to doctrinal elucidation that succeeds in making sense mainly to the converted. In the following paragraphs we shall focus our attention on the points (summarized by me) detailed in PD, Section 4: "New Age and Christian Faith in Contrast."² The document points to the contrasts between Christianity (including Church) and New Age. A few considerations are appended to each summarized statement.

1. God is personal rather than a force to be harnessed or manipulated

The pontifical document pointedly describes God as personal in opposition to the view supposedly held by New Age that God is a force to be manipulated. Yet God cannot be person merely in the way a human being is a person. Even if one uses the three-stage process of predicating God as person - affirm that he is person like us, then deny that he is person like us, and then finally affirm that he is person in an infinitely excellent way - one has still not exhaustively articulated the meaningfulness of God as person. One wonders why the document makes no attempt to consider the apophatic theology that is found in the writings of Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite (c. 500) where concepts and images are seen as giving us only a limited understanding of God. The Christian understanding of God in Jesus begins with faith in Jesus. The content of that faith far from exhausting the meaningfulness of God offers us a unique way of understanding and uniting the Christian believer to God as the Father of Jesus. Could not New Age efforts be viewed as attempts to assert the transcendence of God in contrast to well-intentioned efforts of Christians that make God too anthropomorphic?

2. There is only one Jesus Christ and not many "Christs"

The uniqueness of Christ is not in question. However, a marked reluctance on the part of the Roman dicasteries to recognize and affirm God's revelation outside of the Christian experience seems to shadow their interaction with other faiths. The seeker of truth should be emboldened to discover "God, whose providence, manifestation of

2 JESUS CHRIST The Bearer of the Water of Life, A Christian Reflection on the "New Age", 2003. A document put out by the Pontifical Council for Culture and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, "No. 4, New Age and Christian Faith in Contrast," pp 63-74.

goodness and plans for salvation are extended to all.” (*Nostra Aetate* no.1) The need of the Church to dialogue with those of other faith persuasions is the call given by Pope John Paul in *Ecclesia in Asia*, no. 3. The Christian believer engaging in such dialogue accepts that God’s revelation is present in other religions because of which the mutual enrichment of both dialogue partners can take place. In *Redemptoris Missio* (1990), Pope John Paul II affirmed the usefulness of dialogue for enriching the dialogue partners (55). Should not faith in Christ enable the Christian to recognize authentic revelatory actions of God outside the Christian world? Should not this be the challenge of religious pluralism?

**3. *The human being is individual (therefore autonomous),
not something fading into one universal being***

The Christian dispensation affirms the autonomy of the human individual to highlight human freedom. What characterizes human freedom is personal choice that brings in its wake responsibility for one’s action and its effects. In contrast to fatalism or mere lack of knowledge in making choices, Christian ethics views sinfulness as proceeding from personal accountability. The burden of sin consequent on personal failure (see nr.7. below. and its elimination are contingent on forgiveness. Like the Judeo-Christian tradition that understands sin as the evil for which one is responsible, the Bhakti-marga tradition with its understanding of *prasada* similarly envisages forgiveness to the one who has done wrong.

**4. *Human salvation is God’s gift to persons,
not something that persons construct from their own resources***

At its core, the doctrine of Original Sin affirms the absolute necessity of God for a person to attain self-realization. While in traditional Christian theology this necessity is articulated within the category of history it is not self-evident that other categories do not exist. The otherness of God that makes human persons complete can be valid even in a cosmic perspective. Further, salvation can be seen from the perspective that St. Irenaeus (c. 130-c.200) developed. In opposition to the pessimistic views of Gnosticism regarding the material order, Irenaeus’ theology views salvation in Christ, the Word Incarnate, as growth and development of the human that attains fullest maturity in Christ. In all of this, human salvation remains God’s gift to persons.

**5. *Truth is not a product of the feel-good factor
but of an objective givenness that is knowable by all***

The pontifical document correctly observes that truth results from

an "objective givenness". An implicit argument is made for ethical norms that govern human conduct in the world and are willed by God. But discerning universally valid ethical norms is not the same as perceiving how these are to be applied in varied situations. One may not agree entirely with Joseph Fletcher's approach in defining Situation Ethics, but the need to seriously assess how ethical norms can be responsibly applied to a context cannot be gainsaid.

6. Prayer and meditation imply a talking to God rather than to ourselves

Communing with God has always been a signal mark of the spiritual person. Such communing is referred to as prayer and is seen to be a gift from God. It is variously described as petitioning God about those things which concern salvation: raising one's mind to God, conversing with God and seeking God in all things. In all prayer where a person becomes present to the Almighty, the initiative comes from God. The Christian Tradition does not lack writers who speak about the kinds of prayer that exist, their purpose and function. Many like Ignatius of Loyola, John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila are confirmed mystics in the orthodox tradition of the Catholic Church. The acid test, however, for prayer achieving its purpose is the ability of the one who prays to live the way of life that Jesus proclaimed in the gospels. One recalls that St Gregory Palamos (c. 1296-1359), in his efforts to promote the Hesychast tradition of prayer, suffered from those who opposed this form of prayer as unorthodox. Rather than deciding the object of one's prayer, would there not be more need to examine the effects of prayer on people's lives?

The document has little to say about this acid test. Rather, it identifies a "double orientation of Christian prayer": introspection and a meeting with God. But to speak about 'meeting God' in prayer is too vague a description to differentiate it from talking to ourselves. God is not an object whom we meet in prayer and we are forced to use symbols or the language of analogy to describe what happens in such encounters. The danger of talking to oneself while imagining that one is talking to God exists for the Christian believer as well as for any other person. In effect, the document explains theoretically the difference between psychological states and prayer and cautions a person against confusing one with the other. It charges New Age spirituality with the following: "It is also true that techniques for going deeper into one's own soul are ultimately an appeal to one's own ability to reach the divine, or even to

become divine: if they forget God's search for the human heart they are still not Christian prayer." One can choose to make theoretical claims that are cogent in themselves, but the danger exists of making a caricature of spiritualities that use psychological techniques as preludes to prayer. Could not one argue that the action of divine grace is inscrutable and that the beginning of conscious introspection, e.g. conversion, is already the beginning of prayer?

7. *Sin involves personal failure rather than mere alienation from the whole cosmos*

In no. 3, mention was made of the autonomous status of the individual to underline the importance of personal choice. However, the document has not treated of structural sin and social ethics. Sin involves very much more than personal failure and the social encyclicals from the time of *Rerum Novarum* (1891) to the present have in mind also social and structural sin. Alienation can be seen as entering into the very substance of personal failure in so far as it separates persons and classes (castes) from one another and from God.

8. *Suffering and death constitute the human situation: Christian belief and reincarnation cannot coexist*

The document has done well to call attention to how the suffering Jesus interprets the human situation and offers men and women a way of coping with suffering and death. Further, reincarnation (also 'transmigration' or 'metempsychosis') was seen as undermining the finality of death and the seriousness of human choice that determines one's moral state at the moment of death. Given the worldview of the Christian, reincarnation cannot be reconciled with the doctrine of the resurrection of the body. Up to this point we have been concerned with the meaning of the term reincarnation. However, it is helpful to direct our attention to the meaningfulness of the term reincarnation since the doctrine surrounding it is an attempt "to provide a morally satisfying explanation of the inequalities of fortune and character among mankind, which it ascribes to deeds done in former lives."³

9. *An ambiguity of New Age as regards social commitment*

The document claims that much in New Age is self-promotional,

3 Cross, F. L. and Livingstone, E. A. (Editors): *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, Oxford University Press, third edition, 1997, p. 1077.

that the care of the other is of little consequence, but some leading figures in the New Age movement dispute this claim since it is probably confined to a few. By contrast, Christianity has an essential place for the other and the freedom to love.

**10. *Humans must freely construct their future;
it will not evolve effortlessly to their benefit***

The New Age future is seen to include a perfection that will arrive effortlessly and the document reiterates that whatever that future, it cannot be one that professes a doctrine that seeks to displace Christian understanding and belief as made known in Jesus Christ. This is a healthy reminder of the need to work out one's salvation by identifying with the crucified Christ.

Concluding Remarks

In today's dialogue - both secular and religious - there is an expectation that the Catholic Church would find aspects in other religions that it admires and draws from. However, there always seems to be the fear that if the Church discovers something of benefit elsewhere, this would imply that the Christian revelation had been incomplete. The Church's rather negative assessment of New Age derives from comparing terms as understood in the Church's doctrine with those used by or associated with New Age currents/movements. In dialogue, there is effort to understand the message behind the word and the meaningfulness of a verbal expression. Dialogue is the pattern of interaction that should affect the doctrinal pronouncements of the Church; otherwise Church doctrine would be largely self-serving.

In its efforts to trace certain doctrines and practices linked with Eastern Religions, the PD has adopted a comparative religions' approach. A deficiency in this approach is that the categories for assessing different religions are static. Further, the categories are in fact derived from one axial religion - in this case Christianity - to the detriment of the other *religion*, in this case, New Age.

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Getting Set for the New Age

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The New Age problems affecting mostly the local Churches in the West are being projected by the document as problems of the universal Church. However the heritage of religious pluralism and the struggles of the Asian Churches in encountering the local cultures are not respected in the document. While giving pastoral directives the document should have also made a critical reflection on the real causes of the spiritual crisis in the West.

The Catholic tradition has always shown propensity to discuss and deal with issues of concern to men and women of every age. The recent Vatican document "Jesus Christ the Bearer of the Water of Life" deserves to be lauded for its timeliness as well as its scholarship. Its eagerness to provide 'guidance to Catholics involved in preaching the Gospel and teaching the faith' is praiseworthy. That the document is a 'provisional report' presented with the hope that "this work will in fact provide a stimulus for further studies adapted to different cultural contexts" is gratifying. This assurance provides the impetus for this paper. It is an attempt to reflect on the document from the perspective of Indian experience, focusing primarily on certain methodological and theo-cultural aspects. The key insights are discussed under four titles, with the sectional numbers of the document being given in brackets.

1. Universality of the document:

some geo-social considerations

The importance of the document is evident from the fact that it has been prepared by a Working Group composed of four important dicasteries of the Holy See. Less clear is the constituency the document aims at. There is apparent ambiguity in this regard. On the one hand it is presented as a document with universal applicability, meant for the global

Christian community, when it says that "the success of New Age offers the Church a challenge" (1.5). The underlying assumption is that New Age phenomenon is so worldwide that the Church everywhere has to respond to it. It is seen as 'spread across cultures', and as a 'global phenomenon' (2.5). So it says "Christians in many Western societies, and increasingly also in other parts of the world frequently come into contact with different aspects of the phenomenon known as New Age"(2). Wherever the aim of the document is clarified, no geographical or cultural specifications are given; instead, these are simply presented as "a guide for Catholics involved in preaching the Gospel and teaching the faith at any level within the Church" (1). In other words, the catholicity of the document is affirmed.

Yet, on the other hand, the document presents itself as a response to a crisis that is apparently facing the Church in the West. This is the underlying theme latent in the document, which becomes more explicit at times. "New Age is a witness to nothing less than a cultural revolution, a complex reaction to the dominant ideas and values in Western culture"(2.1). "New Age, as we know it, came from a search for something more humane and beautiful than the oppressive, alienating experience of life in Western society" (2.1). "New Age is a conscious search for an alternative to Western culture and its Judeo-Christian religious roots" (3.1). This is because "in Western culture in particular the appeal for 'alternative approaches' to spirituality is very strong"(1.4). The point of reference is always the Western Church; it notes that New Age "has an extraordinarily powerful appeal, above all, in sophisticated Western societies" (6.1). The Western viewpoint is further evident when it says "New Age imports Eastern religious practices piecemeal and reinterprets them to suit Westerners" (2.4). "In Western cultures in particular", is an oft-repeated phrase in the document. The two centers that are presented as the initial powerhouses of the New Age are the Garden community at Fidndhorn in North-East Scotland, and the Centre for the development of human potential at Esalen in Big Sur, California (2.3.2) - both in the Western world. The document, beyond any doubt, is written from a Western standpoint.

To present Western concerns as universal problems would imply a faulty presentation of the case. New Age may be a critical issue bothering the Church in the Western nations, but may not be in India which has

other urgent and acute problems to struggle with. What is particular to a culture should be dealt with as particular. To say that what is western today may become global tomorrow would betray a colonial mindset.

2. Conflict of worldviews

The document is aware that "some practices are incorrectly labelled as New Age simply as a marketing strategy to make them sell better, but are not truly associated with its worldview"(4). "The term New Age has even been abused to demonize people and practice", it observes, rightly(6.2). But the same document contributes to the same demonization process, consciously or otherwise. It admits that "it is difficult to separate the individual elements of New Age religiosity... from the overarching framework which permeates the whole thought-world on the New Age movement"(4). What it does, on the other hand, is to dismember New Age from its worldview (if such a worldview exists), as a result of which it is difficult to figure out what New Age is. In fact the term New Age itself is debatable and confusing; there is no universal agreement on what it means. What scientific credibility can be claimed for a document that bases its arguments on material that is 'labelled' New Age, often as marketing strategy? It won't be wrong to say that the document sacralizes and legitimizes something that hardly deserves such a blessing.

"From the point of view of Christian faith, it is not possible to isolate some elements of New Age religiosity as acceptable to Christians, while rejecting others", asserts the document. Why not?, we may ask. Two fallacies creep in here. One is the argument that a religious or cultural tradition can be accepted or rejected only in its totality, and never in parts. It goes against the very human experience. In fact, all learning, all conversion, takes place guided by the principle of meaning and relevance; people accept what is relevant and meaningful at a given time and place, while ignoring or rejecting others. The document itself brings into discussion what it considers incongruent with Christian tradition while ignoring others. Is it not 'isolation' of elements? Here occurs the second fallacy: elements isolated from a whole are used to establish their incongruence with the Christian tradition. The inspiring words of Pope John Paul II may be recalled here:

"My thoughts turn immediately to the lands of the East, so rich in religious and philosophical traditions of great antiquity. Among

these lands India has a special place. ... In India particularly it is the duty of the Christians now to draw from this rich heritage the elements compatible with their faith in order to enrich Christian thought." (*Fides et Ratio*, no. 72).

How do we 'draw from this rich heritage' if it is seen as a case of 'all or none'? Western theological tradition is yet to recognize the weakness of this disjunctive logic that is so alien to the Indic mind. The impact of the confusion, resulting from these conflicting directives, on Christian communities in India cannot be ignored.

3. New Age challenge: a lost opportunity for authentic religions to join hands

The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue being part of the Working Group that composed the document, one would naturally expect positive contribution to the task of dialogue. The stated purpose of the document also includes this as a thrust area when it says that "it is an invitation to understand the New Age and to engage in a genuine dialogue with those who are influenced by New Age thought"(1). It is repeated again emphatically, and is presented as "an invitation to Christians to take the New Age seriously, and as such asks its readers to enter into a critical dialogue with people approaching the same world from very different perspectives"(2). Later on it calls upon Catholic cultural centers to be "spaces for honest dialogue"(6.2). These prove the noble intentions of the Commission. In spite of this the document fails to contribute to the mission of dialogue, I am afraid. It is evident from two directions. One refers to the snide remarks it makes about other religious traditions, particularly Indic/Asian religions, that are said to contribute to the New Age thought. The other refers to a lost opportunity to join hands with other religious traditions in dealing with the challenge of New Age. The document rightly points to 'religious relativism', as the mark of the 'cultural environment of New Age phenomenon (4), and this would adversely affect every religious tradition, not only Christianity. Would it not provide a wonderful platform for interreligious collaboration? Sad to say, the Council has failed to explore such a possibility, and ended up too narrow and partisan in its approach to New Age.

The disparaging comments, though subtle, about Indic/Asian religions come across as offensive to Asian sensibilities, and quite painful to Indian Christians too. Examples are too many to quote. "New Age

imports Eastern religious practices piecemeal and reinterprets them to suit Westerners”(24); “New Age has a marked preference for Eastern or pre-Christian religions which are reckoned to be uncontaminated by Judaeo-Christian distortions”(2.3.4.2); “What is offered is often described as simply ‘spiritual’ rather than belonging to any religion, but there are much closer links to particular Eastern religions than many ‘consumers’ realize”(2.5). Hinduism and Buddhism, both nourished in the Indian soil, are explicitly mentioned in this context. Two areas are worth noting: one, the document’s treatment of ‘techniques’ like meditation; two, the comparative approach to religious themes like God, world, human person, Christ, prayer, sin, salvation, transcendence etc.

The claim that “the New Age concept of God is rather diffuse, whereas the Christian concept is a very clear one”(4) displays the tendency to de-link another’s faith concept from its worldview and to judge it through one’s own religious categories. Such concepts are not understood uniformly even by different Christian denominations; no wonder they are not the same in different religious traditions. ‘Karma’ is a revered concept in Indic religions; to say this is ‘irreconcilable with the Christian belief’ is begging the question. For, a religious concept acquires its meaning out of the specific epistemological milieu and within a particular worldview. To dismantle it is to do violence to that tradition. What is at work is ‘religious reductionism’ to serve one’s own interests. Is it wrong to compare religious concepts?, we may ask. Not at all, if it is for deepening proper understanding of these concepts. The comparative approach is well accepted in many disciplines. But danger occurs when comparison becomes a cover for condemnation. Sweeping generalizations in the document bear testimony to this fact: “New Age thinking is based on totalitarian unity, and that is why it is a danger”; “New Age is essentially Pelagian in its understanding of human nature”(4); “they often propose a pantheistic concept of God”; “the fundamental difficulty of all New Age thought is that this transcendence is strictly a self-transcendence to be achieved within a closed universe”(6.1). The questions given as key to evaluate New Age thought and practice from a Christian standpoint (4) clearly illustrate a prejudiced mind-set; eg. Is there one Jesus Christ, or are there thousands of Christs? Do we invent truth or do we embrace it? In prayer and meditation are we talking to ourselves or to God? Is our future in the stars or do we help to construct

it? The connotation of these questions is too obvious to deserve any comment.

'Techniques' is a term that is liberally being used in the document, and it requires closer scrutiny. Prayer that is non-Christian is reduced first to 'meditation techniques', then to 'psycho-social techniques' to 'feel good', and finally are rejected as 'non-prayer' or 'honoured' as 'preparation for prayer'. That is why the document categorically states that "New Age practices are not really prayer"(4). Here the echo of the 1989 document of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith on 'Certain Aspects of Christian Meditation' is evident. The practice of meditation is frowned upon due to its close links to particular Eastern religions, either as a result of utter ignorance or as a fruit of arrogance. "The great religious orders have strong traditions of meditations and spirituality", affirms the document, and recommends them as useful resources. It deliberately seems to forget the rich heritage of 'techniques' associated with Christian meditation over ages.

It may not be wrong to conclude that the document helps to reverse the progress made since Vat. II., and turn the clock back in the perilous path of interreligious dialogue, a burning concern of Indian Christians.

4. Spread of religion in the reverse direction:

Crux of the problem

A deeper historical diagnosis of the phenomenon is necessary to situate the 'crisis of New Age' and its challenge to Christianity in proper perspective. The Christian tradition remained largely confined within the boundaries of the Roman Empire for many centuries, barring a few exceptions. The explosive spread of Christianity to other continents and to other peoples had to wait till the colonial era, which happened to coincide with the missionary period. The 16th to 20th centuries, which were the golden era of the missionary phase, ensured the hegemony of Christianity in most parts of Asia, Africa and the Americas. But with the exit of colonialism by the middle of the 20th century, the Asian religions that remained dormant during the colonial period began to make inroads into other parts of the world, especially Europe and North America. The hegemonic presence of Christianity began to get threatened. This may be called the reverse phase in the expansion of religions. Understandably it does disturb the Church leadership in Western countries. But the problem needs to be diagnosed with tools of historians

and social scientists, not merely those of theologians and philosophers. The volume of literature on New Age that is appearing in the Western media points to the trend of response to New Age that is more emotional than informed. Here the task of analyzing the issue in proper perspective by Christian leaders and theologians remains urgent before rushing to issue directives.

5. Conclusion

Our discussion in this paper was primarily from the Indian standpoint, with its strengths and limitations. This standpoint would easily resonate with the wisdom of Gamaliel when he says: "keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this undertaking is of men, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!" (Acts 5:38-39). This is not to be construed as excuse for uncritical tolerance. After all, the tree is to be judged from its fruits (Mt. 7:20).

The pastoral motive of the document deserves appreciation as the Church steps in to face the challenge of New Age in various parts of the Christian world. The section titled "a positive challenge" (1.5) is prophetic indeed. New Age is to be looked upon as a positive challenge, not a threat. The 'challege' invites us to situate the phenomenon of New Age within the broader scenario of social upheavals and cultural changes taking place in different parts of the world. It also invites us to an honest introspection as regards our Christian witness in a fast changing world. Why is it that our invitation to meet Jesus Christ, the bearer of the water of life, does not carry weight? Is it because we are not profoundly affected by our encounter with Jesus, unlike the woman at the well? If so, the lens of scrutiny has to turn on 'us', not on 'them'. New Age may be a wake up call for us Christians.

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An Aged God or a God of the New Age?

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Over against the New Age notion of God as energy the document rightly upholds the personal dimension of God in a Trinitarian framework. But this is not clearly developed in the document. For this a creative encounter with the theologies of India is a great help. The document seems to lack sensitivity to Indic experiences and perceptions. The document shows reluctance to enter deep into a dialogue with the classical religions of the East and to meet the challenges of modern psychology.

1. Introduction

“Jesus Christ The Bearer of The Water of Life” (hereafter, JCWL) is the title of the Pontifical Council for Culture and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue’s document on the ‘New Age’. The reflections appear at a time when many find New Age an increasingly satisfying substitute for traditional religions and time-tested spiritualities. Among theologians in the West, New Age is discussed in seminars and teleconferences.¹ The present article seeks to respond to JCWL keeping in mind the Indian imagination and the religious, ecclesial and social situation in India, today. It will do this in the light of the avowed intention of the document, namely, “to be a guide for Catholics involved in preaching the Gospel and teaching the faith at any level within the Church” and “to engage in a genuine dialogue with those who are influenced by New Age thought.”

2. Slaking Contemporary Thirsts with ‘The Living Water’

At the outset, JCWL stresses a solid grounding in the Christian faith

1 See, for instance, the February 27, 2004, teleconference held by the Congregation for the Clergy in Rome on “The Church, New Age, and the Sects.” Details available on website www.clerus.org

and quotes St. Peter's: "always have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you all have. But give it with courtesy and respect and a clear conscience" (1 Pet 3:15f). The document consistently reiterates the Catholic doctrinal position with regard to the Triune God, the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, the nature and vocation of (wo)man, the question of sin and salvation, the understanding of suffering, death, final fulfillment and so on. Section 4 of JCWL entitled "New Age and Christian Faith in Contrast" is unambiguous in asserting what the Catholic Church teaches. Assessing these assertions from a magisterial point of view, there is no room for doubt. To this extent, JCWL succeeds in clearly distancing the Catholic faith from New Age beliefs.

Apparently, the grave lacunae in New Age judged by Christian faith criteria are basically three: (a) theological - collapsing divisions between the Absolute, conceptions of the Absolute and the human, and subscribing to pantheism and panentheism, (b) anthropological - attributing absolute value to the individual 'ego' leading to idolatry and diabolical narcissism, (c) ethical - reducing all of religion and spirituality to a 'feel good' market commodity thereby evading questions of sin, evil, social responsibility, and so on. JCWL does well to denounce all these three dangers and distortions firmly and frequently, especially the first two. Thus, while the reflections resolutely and rightly point out to 'the revealed truth' that the Church upholds and preaches, there is weakness in the way the image it uses - namely, Jesus as "the water of life" - is expanded and explained.

In JCWL, although Jesus is appropriately described as 'the water of life', the metaphor is not effectively explored. Section 5 entitled "Jesus Christ Offers Us the Water of Life" seems too short and sketchy. First, the translation 'living water' - suggestive of newness, dynamism and movement - is nearer to the original Greek than 'water of life'.² The 'living water' is mentioned elsewhere in the Scriptures referring to those for whom God is a wellspring, a fountain of life (Jer 2:13, 17:13). One

2 See Max Zerwick and Mary Grosvenor, *A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament*, 4 ed. (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1993), 295, likens the term 'living water' to 'spring water' as opposed to stagnant cistern water (Jer 2:13).

who trusts in God is never stagnant but lives life dynamically. Second, in this reference (Jn 4:10) the 'living water' is juxtaposed with 'the gift of God' that is the Holy Spirit. The 'living water' is once again associated with God's Spirit in Jn 7:38-9. The JCWL fails to highlight this pneumatological dimension that has important repercussions for the ministry of dialogue. Third, an ostensible oversight of the JCWL - and an invaluable insight for any dialogal encounter - is the fact that Jesus initiates dialogue with the Samaritan woman not with a dogmatic discourse on the 'water of life' but with his human thirst for water, and her existential-moral thirst for life. From this commonality comes 'conversion'.

Jesus meets the Samaritan woman with an apparent need for water. His approach makes her feel accepted, respected, needed, understood. Boundaries break - between man and woman, Jew and Samaritan, Rabbi and disciple. The narrative moves, interestingly, from human need (Jesus') to existential-ethical problem (woman's many husbands) and 'conversion'. The woman discovers Jesus as 'Prophet'. Jesus dissociates true belief from any elect people (Jews), any central shrine (Jerusalem), any particular place (mountain). "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." (4:24). The woman's faith progresses with every intervention of Jesus because he 'enters her world and understands her thirsts' (human-social-moral-religious). She progressively accepts Jesus as Prophet (4:19) and Messiah/Christ (4:25). Later, through deeper dialogue with Samaritan society, Jesus is revealed and revered as "the Saviour of the world" (4:42).

The dynamics of the dialogal encounter between the 'living water' Jesus and the thirsty Samaritan woman/society is imperceptible in JCWL. Thus, although JCWL seeks "to engage in a genuine dialogue with those who are influenced by New Age thought" and "to understand the often-silent cry in people's heart, which leads them elsewhere if they are not satisfied by the Church," little sensitivity, openness and dialogue is evident, and thus JCWL will hardly engender reflection and response - either from those on the borderlines of New Age whose root problems are not diagnosed, or from believers of the ancient Eastern religions who are often equated sweepingly with practitioners of New Age. In India, can we not think of more relevant ways of responding to New Age?

3. Towards Fresh and Fruitful Responses to New Age

Indeed, as JCWL points out, New Age is not really 'new' since its widely assimilative capacity accepts and advocates innumerable - at times, even contradictory - ideologies, theories and practices, most of which are ancient. Section 2 states: "Some of the traditions which flow into New Age are: ancient Egyptian occult practices, Cabbalism, early Christian gnosticism, Sufism, the lore of the Druids, Celtic Christianity, mediaeval alchemy, Renaissance hermeticism, Zen Buddhism, Yoga and so on." None of these are new. What is perhaps 'new' is the way New Age is fast spreading worldwide. The speed at which New Age is gaining popularity, and the philosophies and practices it embraces are products of our present, postmodern society. The following reflections in three broad areas already mentioned - namely, theological, anthropological and ethical-moral - could provide some food for rumination and response within the Indian context.

3.1. *An Aged God or a God of The New Age?*

Theological Considerations

The success of New Age can be attributed in part to a general disenchantment with traditional conceptions of space and time and a fascination for millenarian themes. In terms of time frames there is a stress on the waning of the 'Age of Pisces' (Christian age) and the advent of the 'Age of Aquarius'. The 'post-Christian' label is often attached to our present age because Christians today - and this is more true of the so-called 'Christian West' - subscribe to a 'practical atheism' where God is easily dispensed with or fashioned into a sterile, aged Monad manipulatable to suit human whims and fancies. In India, genuine dialogue with religions could critique and counter the fickle foundations of New Age by providing more meaningful conceptions of space, time and divinity.

Running a risk of oversimplification, one could hold that the Indic religions are more amiable to apophatic assertions of the Absolute (e.g., the *neti, neti*) while the Abrahamic religions express the Absolute in cataphatic terms. Time, in the former, is conceptualized in cyclical terms - 'yugas' and 'chakras'; while in the latter group, time is linear. Though differing in spatio-temporal frameworks, all these religious traditions stress the importance of the 'now', the present. Whatever be the conception of religious 'ends' like salvation, *nirvana*, *moksha*, *mukti*

and so on, one must 'be' or 'do' something meaningful so that liberation/salvation become tangible - even if only partly - here and now. Religions' reverence for the 'now' can critique New Age fascination for the future.

Contrary to New Age belief that 'Christ' incarnates often and everywhere, it must be stressed that the term 'Christ' is specific to a particular tradition and as such it does not make sense to loosely speak of many 'Christs'. Moreover, while upholding the historicity of Jesus of Nazareth and his identification with 'Christ' as Son of God, we must also maintain that God is not a Monad - an alien, aged god unconcerned about the world - but God is Parent and Spirit, a creating, creative, caring, compassionate God. To counter New Age in our present age, Christianity must retain the 'personal' dimension of God in a Trinitarian framework (as opposed to New Age 'impersonal energy') while also maintaining the 'transcendental' dimension of God (contrary to New Age pantheism and panentheism). A well-developed Trinitarian theology could effectively address New Age confusion with 'the one and the many' while also providing scope for developing a 'theology of creation' (different from the New Age Gaia cult) and a 'theology of sanctification' (that includes the best of the spiritualities and ancient religions like Hinduism and Buddhism). In this way, the revelation of God - Father, Son, Spirit - could harmonize immanence and transcendence, apophatism and cataphatism, and also accord deep respect towards other religions thereby opening out possibilities for dialogue.

At the turn of the new millennium the Church proposed a 'New Evangelisation'. It would not be inappropriate to speak of the 'God of a New Age' who promises, "I make all things new" (Rev 21:5) and calls all women and men into a partnership that will bring new life, deep hope and true freedom for all.

3.2. *Ego Inflation or Self-Sacrifice?*

Anthropological Considerations

The anthropological premises of New Age conform closely to the individualism engendered by both modernism and postmodernism. Modernism expects the rationalist mind to be the elixir for all evil and deifies the 'I' to the extent that 'I' become god. On the other hand, postmodernism accords such uncritical acceptance of personal opinion and subjective experience to the extent of rejecting anything 'objective'. New Age 'Enlightenment' finds in both, modernism and postmodernism,

convenient bed partners since the 'cult of the self' is preposterously promoted. Conversely, Christianity - as well as Buddhism and some Hindu traditions - propose genuine fulfillment of the 'true self' only through abnegation, detachment and self-sacrifice (Mk 8:35, Jn 12:24).

JCWL has, perhaps, not sufficiently recognized the value of Indic spiritual disciplines like Yoga, TM and Zen. By grouping 'Asian religions' or 'Eastern religions' alongside psychotherapy, tantric exercises, biofeedback, dance and drugs, it simplistically closes doors to dialogue and could even discourage Christians who find in Indic spiritual disciplines effective means of self-awareness that fosters deeper relationship with God. A similar blanketing is also evident in JCWL warnings against depth psychology. Today, psychology has provided humankind with very valuable tools to understand the human reality - especially with theories of the self, human needs, search for meaning, states of (un)freedom, etc. A more complex analysis of religions and psychologies would have helped in unearthing the real dangers of New Age while also leaving open the possibility of dialogue with religions and the need of further research in the field of psychology.

3.3. 'Feel Good' and Do Nothing or 'Feel Bad' and Do Good? Ethical Considerations

To poor and problem-plagued people like us, Indians, New Age poses the gravest threat by anaesthetizing us from social-structural evil and absolving us of our sins. Narcissism and the 'idolatry of the market' cause people to 'feel good' and blame other 'invisible powers' and 'untapped human potentialities' for evil while doing nothing to remedy situations of sin and evil. JCWL mentions this danger but could have more powerfully denounced it by stressing 'social responsibility'. Sin is not merely ignorance but a refusal to do good and to build right relationships - with God, nature, others, self.

With globalisation's obsession with capital and the market, New Age sells its wares well by unburdening its 'believers' of their guilt and responsibility. Since, at the end, JCWL adopts market language and the New Age invitation to Christianity "to take the message of the cathedrals to the fair", it will be fitting if all religions in India, more so Christianity, become 'voices of conscience' making people 'feel bad' at the mess we have created. Moreover, as religion has become a divisive force in India, too, religionists should network in taking responsibility for evil

and evolve joint strategies to combat evil and injustice. Besides strategies, fresh religious symbols could be evolved to stress our commitment to a new world. Here, Indian Christianity is called to perform a prophetic role.

4. Conclusion: Jesus The Bearer of New Life for a New Age

Jesus was a harbinger of 'good news' and 'life in abundance' (Jn 10:10). The life he promised and promoted was not some pie-in-the-sky but a concrete existential situation - epitomized by his 'Kingdom ideal' - wherein the poor were privileged, the hungry fed, the sinners made whole, the sick healed, and all (wo)men assured of their identity and dignity as daughters and sons of God. Moreover, the 'life' that Jesus promised was bought at a price - which he paid through self-sacrifice, sufferings and death. Challenging New Age idolatry, individualism and isolationism, Christians are called to preach the 'ever ancient, ever new' power of love manifest in the Crucified-Risen Jesus. If Christianity - and other religions in India - stress and strive for 'life' - true fullness of life for all - we will not only be able to propose meaningful 'alternatives' that New Age earnestly seeks, but proclaim the new face of The God of Life who constantly calls all women and men to new life in every age; New Age included.

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Jesus Christ: The Answer to the New Age Quest

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The New Age has over the years selectively made use of the certain elements of classical religions and cultures. The questions and insights which evolve out of this process should be a challenge to recapture the neglected dimensions of a holistic Christian experience of faith in life. The language of the traditional dogmatic theology is not an effective answer to these questions.

What is the Christian response to the challenge of the New Age Religiosity or Spirituality that “fills much of the moral space created by the perceived bankruptcy of family, Church and government”?¹ The document *Jesus Christ the Bearer of the Water of Life* prepared by the Pontifical Councils for Culture and Interreligious Dialogue explains the meaning and challenges of the New Age phenomena with pastoral concern and shows how this religiosity undermines the basic Christian faith-affirmations. It shows clearly why the New Age themes are attractive to many people especially in Western countries, how it challenges the Church to be self-critical about its failure to offer to the people what they are searching for in spite of having them all in the living Christian tradition. The New Agers are probably laying stress on the neglected or the less-emphasized aspects of Christian doctrines concerning God, Jesus Christ, humans and the world.

Faithful to its pastoral approach this document exhibits openness in its understanding of the New Age phenomena. It is dialogical in dealing with the New Age themes while affirming basic Christian doctrines. It

1 Michael Brown, *The Channeling Zone: American Spirituality in an Anxious Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 142

avoids a condemnatory tone which is not unusual in dealing with issues of this kind and expresses a deep concern for those who could be misled by the false promises of an appealing religiosity.

1. Various Christian Responses to the New Age

The New Age religiosity defies all definitions. Some consider it a spirituality or religiosity with a pre-conceived idea that all organized religions are bad and all spiritualities are good. Some consider it a movement like other movements that emerge as a response to a particular need of the time. Unlike all other movements New Age has entered into all aspects of human life, namely, religious, cultural, social, political, economic and ecological and psychological. New Age movement takes from various belief systems and ideologies whatever is appealing to the human spirit. It takes from pantheism the idea that God is present in everything; from humanism the idea of the divine dimension of every human being; from Hinduism the belief in re-incarnation; from Christianity the love-command; from Buddhism the idea of non-violence, from Yoga the psycho-somatic training, from Group-dynamics the value of inter-personal communication, from parapsychology the extraordinary endowments or capabilities of humans; from Feminism the need for deconstructing all types of authority especially patriarchy, from Freedom-movements the idea of a life without anxiety; from Eco-socialism the concern for the protection of the environment; from Alternative-Lifestyle Movements the challenge of living a simple life; from the French revolution the principles of equality, liberty and fraternity; from astrology the belief that the zodiacal signs determine a particular epoch, from spiritualism the belief in the continuation of human existence after death and from the theory of evolution the possibility of further upward development all beings. It is a syncretism of the most appealing kind, unthreatening, non-dogmatic and non-authoritarian. It appeals to anyone who finds the Church authoritarian, its doctrine dogmatic, its theology abstract, its structures oppressive and its attitude arrogant. No wonder, then, the New Age movement attracts many in the Western countries who are disillusioned with their experience of Christianity. Its world-view challenges the Christian world-view, its faith and morals.

The Vatican Document lists a number of beliefs, ideologies, principles and practices that are often associated with New Age religiosity though some of them cannot be considered detrimental to the Christian faith or

morals. Christian faith may ignore James Lovelock's "Gaia Hypothesis" which proposes that the whole earth is a living organism because photosynthesizing plants both produce oxygen we breathe and control the atmospheric temperature but it cannot accept what the New Agers further develops from the Gaia Hypothesis, namely, a belief in the 'mother earth' from a pantheistic or monistic world-view. However, who cannot but admire the courage and conviction with which of some New Agers seek to protect the environment and eco-system. Would the Christian faith challenge the Christians to be more committed to the protection of the environment or raise prophetic voice against nations which continue to destroy God's creation in order to satisfy the greed of a powerful minority? Would we reject the Christian understanding of 'wholeness' or 'holiness' because the New Agers use them with different meaning or enrich our own understanding of it by the challenges thrown by the movement? Should yoga and meditation and holistic medicine be rejected because the New Agers have injected into it a new philosophy and spirituality opposed to the Christian faith? Could we deepen our understanding and experience of Cosmic Christ or abandon such an understanding because the New Agers make a caricature of this deep Christian mystery? The Vatican document on the New Age seems to give such an impression though the Pontifical Councils that prepared might not have such an intention. The document refers to Pope John Paul II recognizing the positive aspects of the New Age such as "the search for a new meaning of life, a new ecological sensitivity, and the desire to go beyond a cold, rationalistic religiosity".²

If dialogue is the proper way of dealing with the New Age movement then what is good in it must be recognized as Cardinal Godfried Danneel's pastoral letter on new religious movement does. In this pastoral letter the cardinal criticizes the New Age for its ego-centric world-view and its syncretism but he admits that "the New Age also offers good things: a sense of universal brotherhood, peace and harmony, raising people's awareness, a commitment to bettering the world, a general mobilization of energies for the sake of good, etc. Nor are all the techniques they advocate bad: yoga and relaxation can have many good effects".³ The

2 *Jesus Christ, the Bearer of the Water of Life: A Christian Reflection on the 'New Age'* (Bombay: Pauline Publications, 2003), p. 81

3 "Christ or Aquarius," *Catholic International* 2/3 (1992): 485 cited by John A

challenge of the New Age needs to be taken seriously. It must be confronted theologically and pastorally.

Both Protestant and Catholic Churches are alarmed by the fact that many believers are attracted to the New Age and some have already been weaned away from Christian faith. Both Protestant and Catholic fundamentalists denounce the New Age as a satanic conspiracy to destroy the Church and condemn it without recognizing its positive contributions. Moderate Protestant response can be noted in Ted Peter's approach to the New Age. According to him following propositions can guide Christians in their encounter with the New Age, namely, 1) A modest dabbling in New Age Spirituality is probably harmless; it may be even helpful; 2) The New Age vision is a noble and edifying one; 3) Pastors, theologians and Church leaders should take the New Age movement seriously; and 4) The gnostic monism at the heart of the New Age teaching is dangerous because it leads to naivete and to a denial of God's grace.⁴ Most of the Catholic writers responding to the challenges of the New Age while rejecting a satanic conspiracy theory do not go beyond an apologetic approach to the issues raised by the New Age. According to John Saliba they are convinced that the New Age is an antithesis of Christian belief with a few, if any, redeeming qualities. By evaluating the New Age teachings in the light of conservative Catholic theology, 'their approach revolves around the identification of the false doctrines conceived as a list of propositional truth statements'⁵ The Vatican document *Jesus Christ the Bearer of the Water of Life* too does not seem to go beyond this approach. However, David Toolan who encountered the New Age religiosity in a deeper level and yet analyzed its spirit and teachings dispassionately offers a better approach to the New Age phenomena.⁶ He sees that there is a continuity between the Christian thought and mystical traditions with some theological trends and the quest for meaning and healing in the New Age. As Christian theology has to incorporate the insights of modern developments in

Saliba, "A Christian Response to the New Age," *The Way* 33 (July 1993): p.228.

4 John A Saliba, "A Christian Response to the New Age," *The Way* 33 (July 1993): p.225.

5 Ibid., 226

6 David Toolan, *Facing West from California's Shores: A Jesuit's Journey into New Age Consciousness* (New York: Crossroad, 1987).

philosophy, psychology, physics and cosmology to make it meaningful and relevant for our times Toolan hopes that the Christian theology would also incorporate the best elements of the New Age.

2. Jesus Christ the Answer to the New Age Quest

The New Age images of Jesus Christ vary. They range from considering Jesus to be one of the many teachers of wisdom to the eternal cosmic Christ. They include gnostic and docetic Christologies as well as apocryphal and esoteric Christological speculations. In the face of such a bewildering variety of Christologies the problem lies in the absolutization of one or the other images of Christ as the New Age image of Christ. The Vatican Document on the New Age has listed some of those images and has shown how these images differ from the orthodox Christian faith affirmation about Jesus Christ⁷. However the title of the Document itself Jesus Christ the Bearer of the Water of Life gives an insight into the approach the Pontifical Councils of Culture and Interreligious Dialogue take in dealing with the New Age challenge of presenting the new millennium as the age of Aquarius, 'the water-bearer'. The title does not seem to suggest a polarization of the two concepts of Christ but makes a bold assertion that Jesus Christ is the Aquarius that the New Age is speaking about or Jesus Christ is the one who is the real bearer of the water the New Agers are searching for. In the whole document this approach is not followed till the end. It is understandable. Paul or John, Justin, Clement of Alexandria or Augustine would have followed this approach as their experience of Jesus Christ was such that they would see everything Christic. Since no image of Christ or Christology can exhaust the mystery of Jesus Christ each in its own way expresses some aspect of Christ without excluding the other. Is Jesus Christ the Logos of the Greeks? Certainly he is. Is he also not a prophet? Undoubtedly he is. The questions about him can go on and on. Each time the believer would go on confessing that it is he. They would confess too that he couldn't be what we know to be ungodly, inhuman and non-cosmic.

Jesus Christ, the Word who become flesh and dwelt among us, is also the light that enlightens everyone coming into the world and is the life of all. This basic affirmation gives an insight into the possibilities

7 *Jesus Christ the Bearer of the Water of Life*, pp.65-66

which are open to humans to encounter him. The early theologians of the Church interpreted Jesus Christ as the Messiah of Jewish expectations as well as the fulfilment of the hope cherished by the Gentiles of all times. Ignatius of Antioch (d. C.E. 110), for example, affirmed that Jesus was "our common name and common hope"⁸

The Christian proclamation, especially in the first three centuries, began with the basic assumption that Jesus Christ is "the expected one" of all peoples and cultures even if they had not expressed this expectation as the Jewish people did. It was assumed, too, that he was the answer even if the question was not articulated properly in some cultures. Therefore, the search of the early theologians was to find out those ultimate questions in the Graeco-Roman culture to which Jesus Christ was the answer.⁹ The early community proclaimed Jesus as the light of revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to the people of Israel (cf. Lk 2:32) J. Pelikan has rightly pointed out that the methods employed by the NT writers to interpret the meaning and message of Jesus successfully in terms of the Hebrew Bible, as the glory of Israel were used by the early theologians to interpret him as the light for revelation to the Gentiles in terms of Gentile writing.¹⁰

Christian apologists were aware of the recognition accorded to the Gentile saints like Job, Jethro and Baalam in the Hebrew Bible. Since God's revelation was not the monopoly of the Jewish people they could conclude, as Augustine did when he wrote, "it is not unreasonable to believe that there may have been men among other races to whom the mystery of Christ was revealed and who felt an impulse to proclaim what they knew."¹¹ So they recognized the prophecies about Christ in the literature of the Gentiles. For example, in the fourth Eclogues of Vergil, the Roman poet, they found the prophecies about a "new order" breaking forth with the returning of a virgin and "the birth of a child with whom the iron age of humanity will end and the golden age begin."¹²

8 Ignatius of Antioch, *Ephesians*, 10.1; 1.2.

9 J. Pelikan, *Jesus through the Centuries* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), p.34.

10 *Ibid.*, p.35.

11 Augustine, *The City of God*, books XVII-XXII, G.G. Walsh and D.J. Honan Trs. (New York: Fathers of the Church Inc., 1954), p.165.

12 Vergil, *Eclogues*, 4. 5- 52, cited by J. Pelikan, p.35.

Such predictions of a gentile poet were easily recognized as referring to Christ. Though the prophesy was referring to emperor Augustus it was interpreted by emperor Constantine and Augustine as referring to Christ. Augustine contended that "it is of (Christ) that this most famous poet speaks."¹³ The apologists and theologians like Justin and Clement of Alexandria had no difficulty in recognizing the quest for ultimate meaning as the quest for Jesus Christ and in the answers found by the Gentiles they found a quest for encountering Jesus Christ.

The Christic experience of the apostolic and post-apostolic communities liberated their members to encounter God, humans and world in their inter-relationship. By the fact of incarnation everything was christified and everything becomes a sacrament of Christ in a new way. As Raimon Panikkar would say, everything is a *Christophany*, a manifestation of Christ.¹⁴ The post-apostolic writings are replete with such a rich variety of symbols for Christ, that, as J.A. Sanford points out, they "are almost inexhaustible".¹⁵ For example, Christ is the tree,¹⁶ the flower,¹⁷ the fire,¹⁸ the milk,¹⁹ the stone,²⁰ the city,²¹ etc. There are many theriomorphic symbolizations of Christ as the good serpent, as an eagle, as a calf, as a lamb, as a lion, or as a worm (Ps 22:6) and the most important among them is the fish.²² The early Christian experience of the mystery of Christ was such that everything they encountered became a Christophany.

Conclusion

One way of recapturing the neglected dimension of the Christian experience of Jesus Christ in the context of the New Age images of Cosmic Christ and Creation spiritualities is to reaffirm the totality of the

13 Augustine, *The City of God*, X.7.

14 R.Panikkar, "A Christophany for Our Times," *Theology Digest*, 39:1 (1992), pp. 3-21.

15 J.A. Sanford, *Mystical Christianity - A Psychological Commentary on the Gospel of John* (New York: Crossroad, 1993) p.24.

16 Methodius, *Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, 9.3.

17 Ambrose, *On the Holy Spirit*, 2.8.38-39.

18 Ibid., 3

19 Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor*, 1.6.

20 Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 3.1.

21 Augustine, *City of God*, 10.7.

22 See J.A. Sanford, 25.

person of Jesus Christ, divine and human, immanent and transcendent, cosmic and meta-cosmic, historical and trans-historical. It was the approach of Paul and John who faced the gnostic and docetic religiositiies and the logos philosophy of the Greeks of their time. They did not reject such philosophies and spiritualities altogether but they filled the best elements in them with their Christic experience and used them to communicate some deeper aspects of the inexhaustible mystery of Christ. At least in the title the Vatican document seems to have followed the approach of Paul and John in responding to the New Age.

We must admit that the best elements of the New Age are not new to Christian theology. They are the neglected elements of the rich Christian tradition often 'rejected by the builders' for reasons best known to them but created an impoverished theology that unwittingly gives space to a variety of dehumanizing, ego-centric, world-negating spiritualities and practices. This is an opportune moment to revitalize Christian theology and liberate it from all dogmalatry and exclusivism and make it truly catholic. Indian Christian theology can contribute much to the liberation of an exclusivistic theology and the spirituality that emerges from it and promote the birthing of a new spirituality and a theology which are more catholic, holistic, biblical and genuinely Christian.

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What We Need: A Reasoned Education for the New Age

Francis X. Clooney

In meeting the challenges of the New Age Christians have to make themselves well acquainted with the sources and experiences of the New Age. Further, a return to the genuine Christian sources in a new way is needed: we need to look at Christ with *new* eyes. This is possible only if we Christians are aware of authoritarianism, insensitivity to women and violence to the earth, quite prevalent in traditional theology and Church praxis.

"Jesus Christ, The Bearer of the Water of Life" is in many ways an exemplary document. It raises an important and timely issue in an informative manner; it includes a helpful glossary and bibliography; the array of religious images, ideas, and writings loosely grouped under the title "New Age" are placed in a historical perspective, diligently and ably reconstructed; there is a real effort not merely to lump disparate movements together; while the authors clearly worry about a pernicious influence of New Age religious movements on the faith and spirituality of Roman Catholics, they also seek to present the challenge as a positive occasion for honest self-scrutiny by Roman Catholics; the document rightly points out that some developments of New Age thought - such as may overly stress the divinity of the world or the inner self, or entirely dismiss the roles of tradition and reason in the life of faith - are almost inevitably opposed to Christian faith; and yet, the appeal to the Roman Catholic tradition is not merely an appeal to authority nor a distrust of what is new and outside Church control; rather it is rooted in a respect for the Roman Catholic way of bringing faith and reason into conversation. Indeed, were "Jesus Christ, The Bearer of the Water of Life" proposed as the final word on New Age religions, it would be inadequate, since most issues are touched upon only lightly and only in

a way that serves as a prelude to actual conversation. But if we take it as mapping the proposed conversation, within parameters appropriate to the Roman Catholic tradition, then it can be welcomed as a very helpful foundation and wise guide for further conversation. In the following paragraphs I propose several areas for further study and reflection.

My premise is that the document's emphasis on the importance of reason places before us two interconnected educational tasks: a deeper understanding of the Christian faith and spirituality, and a deeper understanding of New Age religious movements and their roots. For Christians, the first task is more important, of course, and in practice must be engaged first in Catholic communities. But relearning our tradition will require great honesty. As the document reminds us, "People feel the Christian religion no longer offers them - or perhaps never gave them - something they really need. The search which often leads people to the New Age is a genuine yearning: for a deeper spirituality, for something which will touch their hearts, and for a way of making sense of a confusing and often alienating world... If the Church is not to be accused of being deaf to people's longings, her members need to do two things: to root themselves ever more firmly in the fundamentals of their faith, and to understand the often-silent cry in people's hearts, which leads them elsewhere if they are not satisfied by the Church." (1.5) The first challenge then is for the Church - particularly those in positions of authority, particularly the Vatican - to engage in humble self-scrutiny, to ask whether our Roman Catholic way of proceeding is not rightly seen (whatever the reality may be or should be) as authoritarian, officious, appearing to have nothing to learn, concerned more with externals than interior spiritual values, open to reasoning only as long as it leads to favored conclusions, uncomfortable with women and women's ways of perceiving the world, frightened by new movements, particularly those arising from ordinary people's intuitions instead of from Church offices, and in general resentful of the fact that even many Christians are finding spiritual sustenance outside officially approved ecclesiastical venues. We must examine ourselves honestly on these and other such matters, taking to heart the fact that others judge us not only more harshly, but perhaps with greater clarity than we judge ourselves. In light of such reflection and repentance, then we can return anew to the rich Biblical and traditional sources of our faith - the

texts, the rites and sacraments, the pieties and theologies, the mystical paths - and allow these to flourish in our new century.

But we must also undertake what I have identified as a second task: a deeper understanding of New Age religious movements and their roots. This informative document enables us to start doing this, and our response to it should include a plan for the wider and deeper education required of persons who would be educated Christians in the 21st century. I suggest three ways to begin this education. First, we need actually to read the New Age literature. Much of the New Age subsists in sounds, smells, practices, to be sure, but at least we can begin by reading and discussing the works that sell well. Almost a decade ago, the quarterly publication of my university, *The Boston College Magazine*, (Summer 1995 issue, Volume 54, number 3) published a conversation of five university faculty members about New Age books whose sales averaged, at that time, over a million copies each: Sophy Burnham's *A Book of Angels*, Jack Canfield's and Mark Hansen's *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, Thomas Moore's *Care of the Soul*, Scott Peck's *The Road Less Traveled* and *Further Along the Road Less Traveled*, and James Redfield's *The Celestine Prophecy*. In a conversation provocatively entitled "Spirituality Lite", the Boston College faculty honestly explored both the strengths and weaknesses of these popular New Age books, made pertinent comparisons and contrasts with classics of Christian spirituality, explored the social and cultural context for such works, and exchanged wise advice on how to read them while remaining attentive to the Christian tradition. Such conversations are possible, if one is willing to read; it is up to Catholic educators to facilitate both the reading and the consequent conversations.

Second, we need to explore in depth some of the leading iconic figures of the New Age pantheon. In addition to older and founding figures such as Madame Blavatsky and Annie Besant, footnote 15 lists an array of figures whose works are counted as influential by New Age practitioners: "When respondents were asked to name individuals whose ideas had influenced them, either through personal contact or through their writings, those most often named, in order of frequency, were Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, C.G. Jung, Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, Aldous Huxley, Robert Assagioli, and J. Krishnamurti... Paul Tillich, Hermann Hesse, Alfred North Whitehead, Martin Buber, Ruth Benedict,

Margaret Mead, Gregory Bateson, Tarthang Tulku, Alan Watts, Sri Aurobindo, Swami Muktananda, D.T. Suzuki, Thomas Merton, Willis Harman, Kenneth Boulding, Elise Boulding, Erich Fromm, Marshall McLuhan, Buckminster Fuller, Frederic Spiegelberg, Alfred Korzybski, Heinz von Foerster, John Lilly, Werner Erhard, Oscar Ichazo, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Joseph Chilton Pearce, Karl Pribram, Gardner Murphy, and Albert Einstein." This is of course a formidable list; we can assume that many of those on it might be surprised to find themselves so popular among New Age seekers.

In any case, we need to re-read carefully works as disparate as those of Teilhard, Merton, Suzuki, and Krishnamurti, and to ponder the sources of their energy and enduring appeal. Why do many Catholics still love to read Merton in all the rich complexity of his meditations, studies, opinion pieces and poetry? While Teilhard is less known today than in past decades, what is it about his vision of the human future that still touches hearts and imaginations more eloquently than many more sober, approved classics? How did Suzuki manage to make the practice of Zen, itself so arduous and demanding, a path even young Catholics are willing to try, while some traditional Catholic spiritualities, also beautiful and arduous, gather dust? And while Krishnamurthy is hardly the kind of figure that anyone - himself included - would imagine could be easily integrated into a Catholic way of living, how ought we respond to his measured, reflective, and austere appeal for honest self-knowledge, or to his famous 1929 insistence "that Truth is a pathless land, and you cannot approach it by any path whatsoever, by any religion, by any sect... Truth, being limitless, unconditioned, unapproachable by any path whatsoever, cannot be organized; nor should any organization be formed to lead or coerce people along any particular path"? If, as the document rightly insists, it is Catholic to integrate faith and reason for the sake of an integral spiritual path, then it will not do merely to ignore Krishnamurthy, or merely to announce that his views are anti-institutional and thus incompatible with normative Catholic teaching. It is more to the point, I suggest, for us to study his writings and lectures, to learn from him, and to speak intelligently in response to his challenge.

Finally, the document's authors rightly point out that many New Age ideas and practices, often seemingly bereft of tradition, are in fact

rooted in ancient, still living religious traditions, most particularly Hindu and Buddhist. For instance, the document makes the following observations on New Age connections to Hinduism: "the connection between the spiritual and the physical aspects of the person is said to be in the immune system or the Indian chakra system..." (2.2.3); "reincarnation was a part of Hindu cyclical thought, based on the *atman* or divine kernel of personality (later the concept of *jiva*), which moved from body to body in a cycle of suffering (*samsara*), determined by the law of *karma*, linked to behavior in past lives..." (2.2.3); "a prominent component of Mrs. Blavatsky's writings was the emancipation of women, which involved an attack on the 'male' God of Judaism, of Christianity and of Islam. She urged people to return to the mother-goddess of Hinduism and to the practice of feminine virtues..." (2.3.2); "many people are convinced that there is no harm in 'borrowing' from the wisdom of the East, but the example of Transcendental Meditation (TM) should make Christians cautious about the prospect of committing themselves unknowingly to another religion (in this case, Hinduism), despite what TM's promoters claim about its religious neutrality..." (6.2) These are astute and apt allusions to make, and the authors thus rightly urge readers to search out the roots of "New Age religions" in "Old Age religions". Our task, I suggest, is again a work of education, to aid Catholics in understanding the great religions of the world in depth and with accurate detail and appropriate contextual awareness. Here again, reason is an important factor in our response to the New Age, for it is reasonable to learn well the very old religious traditions from which sometimes ill-informed Catholics borrow eclectically rather than with care; by reason we can understand the doctrines and practice of those traditions in their proper contexts. Hindu and other religious traditions turn out actually to be our allies in offering a corrective to spiritualities that may be, or appear to be, rootless, privatized, bereft of tradition, and antagonistic to reason, since the great religious traditions share with us both the values and the actual practice of providing reasoned, communal foundations for spiritual practice.

In the end, as the document again correctly observes, no amount of attentiveness or learning should change or weaken the essential Christian faith claim that "the Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ, her Lord. He is at the heart of every Christian action, and every Christian message. So the Church constantly returns to meet her Lord." (5) This does not

change ever. But once we have examined ourselves in the light of the New Age religions (as well as in light of numerous other vital perspectives), we will be as it were cleansed of our own blinding and noxious fumes, and relieved of the needless, heavy baggage that sometimes seems to weigh down our Catholic tradition. We shall again be able to see Christ with new eyes, eyes opened, in this New Age.

As the document reminds us in explaining its paradigmatic image of the encounter of Christ and the woman at the well (hence "the Water of Life" in the title), this encounter "has even been described [by Sister Helen Bergin, O. P.] as 'a paradigm for our engagement with truth'. The experience of meeting the stranger who offers us the water of life is a key to the way Christians can and should engage in dialogue with anyone who does not know Jesus." (5) Finding Christ in the stranger, even the stranger who is a New Age writer and practitioner, is a wonderful ideal that the educated, informed Catholic can hope to make a reality, in the new age that is our third millennium.

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How God is Related to the Human?

Dominic Veliath

Dei Verbum focuses on the relationship between God and the human persons as sharing in life. The advocates of the New Age however do not interpret it in this manner. The way grace has been understood in the Church could be a response to the questions posited by the New Age.

1. Introducing the Issue

The document *Jesus Christ The Bearer of the Water of Life. A Christian Reflection on the "New Age"*, issued jointly by the Pontifical Council for Culture and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, in Chapter Four, entitled: *New Age and Christian Faith in Contrast*, articulates ten questions and contrasts the respective answers of Christianity and the New Age Spiritualities¹:

1. Is God a being with whom we have a relationship or something to be used or a force to be harnessed?
2. Is there just one Jesus Christ, or are there thousands of Christs?
3. The Human Being: Are there many individuals or is there one universal?
4. Is salvation a free gift from God or do we save ourselves?
5. Do we embrace truth or do we invent it?
6. Prayer and Meditation: are we talking to God or to ourselves?
7. Do we accept that there is such a thing as sin or are we tempted to deny it?

1. Pontifical Council for Culture & Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Jesus Christ, The Bearer of the Water of Life. A Christian Reflection on the "New Age"*, c.4.

8. Are we encouraged to accept or reject suffering and death?
9. Is social commitment something to be positively sought after or something to be shirked?
10. Do we help to construct our future or is our future in the stars?

The points articulated above, constitute, as it were, a mixed bag touching on issues connected with Fundamental Theology, Christology, Theological Anthropology, Soteriology, Asceticism, Epistemology etc. The Christian understanding, obviously in need of nuancing, is generally expressed in the first of the ten alternatives presented in each instance, whereas the document outlines what it considers to be the response of “New Age Spiritualities” in the second alternative.

In this brief reflection, it is not my intent to assess whether a particular expression or movement falls under the umbrella category of the “New Age Spiritualities”. Instead, I limit my focus to one of the assumptions underpinning these alternatives, viz. the relationship between God and the human being, which, according to the Vatican document, has been understood by the “New Age Spiritualities” in a flawed manner.

2. Articulating the Issue

For Catholic Christianity in general, the relationship to God is seen as constitutive of the human being as such; which is “creaturality” in its essence². Though this relationship may be lived on the level of personal religious experience, it is nevertheless indispensable that one be able to situate and assure this experience also theologically, on the level of the *intellectus fidei* where it can withstand the fire of contestation.

This relationship has been articulated at two levels. On the level of Fundamental Theology, Judaeo-Christian reflection, basing itself on the Bible, has articulated the key category of “creation”, whereby the rest of reality is understood as totally dependent on God, without, however, being God.

This concept has been given intellectual depth and consistency especially by Scholastic Theology in terms of the category of causality. In its framework of understanding, God is neither the formal cause, nor the material cause of creation (both of which are intrinsic causes); He is

2. See Jean Danielou, “Présence Moderne et Transcendance de Dieu”, in *Monde Moderne et Sens de Dieu* (Paris 1954), 67.

3.3. In the *Decree on Justification* of the Council of Trent, perhaps the most comprehensive of the Roman Catholic Church's official teachings on Grace, the following points are made a) Justification is both a real remission of sins and a sanctification of the human person; b) This justification is from God but in the human persons; hence, their own; and involves a free acceptance on their part; however, it can be lost by mortal sin¹⁰.

3.4. The entire *De Auxiliis* controversy which characterised the Theology of Grace from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, can be envisaged as different attempts to safeguard God's predestination rightly understood (The Dominican School with its proponent Domingo Bañez); and the on the other hand, human liberty (The Jesuit School with its proponent Luis de Molina).¹¹ It is to be noted, however, that both systems tend to objectify the mystery of God, assuming that "God is a cause on the same plane of meaning and reality as created causes"¹².

3.5. During the Middle Ages, Thomistic theology, following Aristotle, tended to classify realities into natures; human nature was envisaged as the permanent principle whereby a human being is constituted as human. However, the end to which human beings are called, far transcends their human nature. They are called to be children of God; this is known only by revelation - a goal which is termed "supernatural" (i.e. above nature), since it is not within the attainment of human nature. Consequently Scholasticism held that there was a radical distinction between the order of the natural and that of the supernatural - between nature and grace.¹³

3.6. But, in such a vision, the supernatural seems to figure solely from outside. This new life seems to be alien to human existence itself and superimposed on nature, accentuating the natural-supernatural divide. To deal with this problem the so-called *Nouvelle Théologie* exploited

10. See *ibid.*, 137-139.

11. See in this regard, Nigel Abercrombie, "Grace in the Sixteenth through Eighteenth Centuries", in Edmund Fortman (ed.), *The Theology of Man and Grace: Commentary. Readings in the Theology of Grace*, (Milwaukee 1966), 266-271.

12. Leonardo Boff, *Liberating Grace*, (New York 1979).

13. See Henri Bouillard, *Conversion et grâce chez S. Thomas Aquin*, (Paris 1944).

the idea of the natural ordination of human existence towards a desire for God¹⁴.

But this created another problem. since this would undermine the total gratuity of grace and salvation; in a sense it would be owed to this natural desire and ordination.

3.7. Karl Rahner resolved this dilemma by positing the “supernatural existential”, according to which, since God desires the salvation of all, our concrete actual, historical state has already been raised up to the supernatural level from the beginning by the gratuitous supernatural call of God. This situation remains a free gift, but is never absent in the concrete. In a nutshell, Karl Rahner rejects all dualism in the Catholic understanding of the relationship between nature and grace.¹⁵

To sum up the process: one can speak of an anthropology in the making which is integral to the Catholic vision according to which, the human being is situated in his/her total dependence on a triune God, without being God (creation). On another level, this human being is called to share God’s life through a gratuitous gift of God realized through Jesus Christ, which is not his/her due as a human being. It is in this context that human freedom is situated.

4. The Catholic Anthropological vision vis-à-vis the New Age Spiritualities

Some of the issues underpinning the New Age Spiritualities concern precomprehension, perspective, method and hermeneutics; the issues touch on the very parameters of theological reflection as it is understood by the Catholic community and are *obviously* alien to the community experience and articulation.

Other paradigms, instead, bear testing. This testing, acknowledgement and authentication, at least as far as the Catholic community experience understands itself, has to be an ecclesial task, viz. to assess adequacy of the new paradigm to reflect in its own categories, the experience which the old paradigm had striven to understand and formulate¹⁶.

14. See Henri Rondet, *art. Nouvelle Theologie*, in *Sacramentum Mundi* IV, 234-236.

15. See Karl Rahner, “Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace”, in *Theological Investigations* I, 297-317.

16. Cf. J.T. Walsh, “Being Theologians in a Paradigm-Shift”, in *Louvain Studies* 9 (Fall 1982), 116-117.

the efficient and final cause of creation (both of which are extrinsic causes). In their inimitable style, the Scholastic theologians expressed this relationship in a pithy manner, asserting that, with respect to God, the rest of reality constitute *plura entia*, but not *plus entis*.

This entire discussion, however, is raised to another level in the context of Revelation, Redemption and Salvation in Jesus Christ. In Catholic theology, this dimension has been conventionally dealt with in the treatise called "Grace". The word "grace", the English translation of the Latin word *gratia*, and the equivalent of the Greek *charis*, is itself symbolic of the Christian understanding of this relationship. It conveys three main ideas which are themselves symbolic of Christian Revelation: "condescending love, conciliatory compassion and fidelity."³

Grace becomes an open concept capable of embracing the whole of God's gift of himself to the human and so capable of indefinitely various further particularization. It is not as though we were to itemize God's gifts and call one of them "grace"; it is rather that "grace" qualifies the whole of God's self-communication as a gift beyond all telling.⁴

Roger Haight, in his book *The Experience and Language of Grace*⁵ underscores the fact that "there can be many possible languages of grace or systems for understanding the relation between us and God".⁶ Among the models mentioned are the following:

- A Metaphorical Understanding found in the Bible (God our Father and we God's children)

- A Metaphysico-Ontological Understanding found in Thomas Aquinas and the Scholastics wherein the relationship between God and human beings is articulated in terms of being. Grace is understood as a new "quasi-nature".

- A Relationship with Special Reference to Human Freedom, found in Augustine, Pelagius, and the so-called *De Auxiliis* controversy present in the Church from the XVI to the XVIII centuries.

- An Interpersonal Framework as for example in Martin Luther, whereby God accepts the human being in his/her unacceptability.

3. Peter Fransen, *The New Life of Grace*, (Tournai 1969), 15.

4. Cornelius Ernst, *The Theology of Grace* (Notre Dame, 1974), 29.

5. Roger Haight, *The Experience and Language of Grace*, (New York 1979).

6. *Ibid.* 24 ff.

- A Transformative Framework which finds its expression in the *Tridentine Decree on Justification* where the relationship is seen in its transforming effects on the human being.

- A Liberative Framework which emphasizes the relationship inasmuch as it involves the integral liberation.

Most of the above conceptions contain a kernel of truth; most of them highlight some aspects of the Christian understanding of the relationship with God, though some to a lesser extent and with less authority. Of these attempts at articulation, some have the status of official dogmatic formulations of the Catholic Church (for example the *Tridentine Decree on Justification*), others are merely theological, while still others have been sharply criticised by the Catholic self-understanding, (for example, that of Pelagius and the Lutheran understanding)⁷. However, in the context of all these discussions and controversies, a Catholic Anthropology in its Christological implications was in the process of being gradually formulated.

3. Tracing the Contours of an Ongoing

Catholic Anthropology in its Christological Implications

In the course of history, the Catholic community, under the movement of the Spirit, has been in the process of articulating an anthropology which has become part of its vision. To pinpoint some of the milestones of the same:

3.1. In the Sixteenth Council of Carthage (418), against Pelagius, it has affirmed the universal need of all human beings for Christ⁸.

3.2. This is endorsed in the Second Council of Orange (529) which will underscore the same need even to the moments of conversion and perseverance⁹.

7. However, even in this regard, there has been a better understanding between the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation regarding the issue of justification. Cf. *The Joint Declaration by the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church on the Doctrine of Justification*, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, (Weekly English Edition), vol. 47 (1618), November 24, 1999, I - VIII.

8. See in this regard, J. Neuner & J. Dupuis (eds.), *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, (Bangalore 1987), p. 135.

9. See *ibid.*, 136.

In the encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, Pope John Paul II indicates certain criteria pertinent to the issue: a) Acknowledging the universality of the human spirit, whose basic needs are the same all over the world; b) While engaging cultures for the first time, recognizing that the Church cannot abandon what she has gained from her inculturation in the past (in the Greco-Latin thought in particular); c) The rejection of all isolationism. No particular tradition should remain closed in its difference and affirm itself by opposing other traditions¹⁷.

In the contemporary world of science, as Thomas Kuhn seems to suggest, progress is at times seen as a repeated attempt to construct models of understanding, to explain increasingly complex data. A new model of understanding constitutes a new paradigm. During a paradigm shift disputes tend to focus on fundamental paradigms rather than on "points of doctrine" or formulations. Often these new paradigms are discontinuous with old ones and can neither be understood nor evaluated by using an old paradigm. A new paradigm brings with it a new system of categories and discourse¹⁸.

That may be true, as far as the world of science and technology is concerned, however, it is to be noted that Catholic theological reflection, on the contrary, involves a certain catholicity in time. There is inset in the faith response a certain continuity with the past, which eschews all relativism, while not excluding explication or a deeper insight and growth in the understanding of the Christian fact¹⁹.

The encyclical of Pope John Paul II *Fides et Ratio* has something pertinent to say on this matter.

As regards the validity of dogmatic statements it asserts the following: "... Dogmatic statements, while reflecting at times the culture of the period in which they were defined, formulate an unchanging and ultimate truth"²⁰. Consequently, "the faithful must... shun the opinion, ... that dogmatic formulas (or some category of them) cannot signify the truth

17. Pope John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, 72.

18. Thomas S Kuhn *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, (The University of Chicago Press Ltd., London, Second Edition, Enlarged 1970), pp. xii + 210.

19. See in this regard Yves M. J. Congar, *Tradition and the Life of the Church*, (London 1964).

20. Pope John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, 95.

in a determinate way, but can only offer changeable approximations to it, which to a certain extent distort or alter it"²¹.

The "New Age Spiritualities" tend to see themselves, to a considerable extent, as a post-Christian phenomenon. Coming down to some of the issues in question:

1. *God is a force to be harnessed.* Such a stance would obviously go counter to the Christian understanding of God as personal and as distinct from the creature.

2. *There are thousands of Christs.* A similar stance would be reductionistic, given the Christian understanding of Jesus Christ as the Only Son of God made man; and as such unique and universal. On the other hand, the human being is only a creature called to share God's life through grace.

3. *There is one universal being. Our future is in the stars.* Such stances would go counter to the Christian understanding of the human being as person endowed with freedom and responsibility. True, ours is a "situated freedom", but it is nevertheless freedom.

4. *We save ourselves.* Such a stance, viewed in exclusivistic terms, is obviously reductionist and Pelagian.

5. *We invent truth. We are tempted to deny Sin.* Such stances would eventually go counter to a Christian understanding of God, as one who is distinct from and confronts the human person in his/her freedom and responsibility.

5. Summing up

In the history of the Theology of Grace one encounters the figure of Michael du Bay (1513-1589), or Baius, as he is known in keeping with the Latinized form of his name. Imbued with almost "messianic" fervour, he set out to do for theology what the scholars of the Renaissance were doing for other branches of learning; that is to build up a theology as it were *ab ovo*, "dispensing with all the intellectual equipment other than the indispensable minimum of basic principles and the scholar's own

21. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Declaration in Defence of the Catholic Doctrine on the Church Mysterior Ecclesiae*, (24 June 1973), AAS 65 (1973), 403.

wits, and so, by ignoring the accomplishments of the Middle Ages, to surpass them"²². But, in the last analysis, as most scholars would admit, he only succeeded in repeating the mistakes of the past. Nigel Abercrombie calls Du Bay "the Pelagius of Paradise"²³. Perhaps the same can be said to an extent of certain aspects of some of the "New Age Spiritualities", which claim to be a post-Christian phenomenon. It would not be unwarranted to call it yet another instance, on the theological level, of the tested wisdom of the age-old adage": Whoever ignores history is doomed to repeat its errors".

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22. Nigel Abercrombie, "Grace in the Sixteenth through Eighteenth Centuries", in Edmund J. Fortman (ed.), *The Theology of Man and Grace*, (Milwaukee 1966), 262.
23. *Ibid.*, 264.